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# Emerging from the chrysalis: Isolation and publication in nineteenth-century literacy narratives

Lisa Ann Sisco

*University of New Hampshire, Durham*

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EMERGING FROM THE CHRYSALIS:  
ISOLATION AND PUBLICATION  
IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY LITERACY NARRATIVES

BY

LISA A. SISCO  
B.A. Georgetown University, 1984  
M.A. Georgetown University, 1988

DISSERTATION

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire  
in Partial Fulfillment of  
the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

September, 1995



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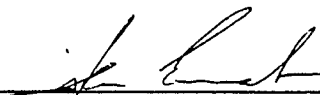
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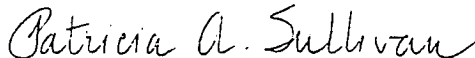
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John Ernest,  
Assistant Professor of English



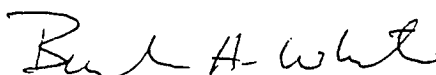
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Lester Fisher,  
Professor of English



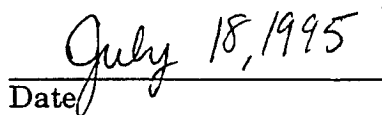
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Patricia A. Sullivan,  
Associate Professor of English



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Barbara A. White,  
Professor of Women's Studies



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Date

## **DEDICATION**

**For Mary Jo and Bob**

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One of the most important things this dissertation has taught me is that any act of literacy requires the support of a community of people willing to nurture a writer's need for isolation *and* to help negotiate the difficulties of publication. I am fortunate to have been surrounded by a community of people who recognize that literacy is a constantly shifting process of private and public activity. They have understood the value of the invisible activities that occur in the chrysalis and have trusted me when I retreated into my own isolation. When I emerged from my refuge, they have been there to offer support and advice.

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discussions about Frederick Douglass were integral to my thinking in that chapter. Barbara White provided valuable commentary on an early draft.

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## ABSTRACT

### EMERGING FROM THE CHRYSALIS: ISOLATION AND PUBLICATION IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY LITERACY NARRATIVES

by

Lisa A. Sisco  
University of New Hampshire, September 1995

“Emerging From the Chrysalis” begins with the words of Frederick Douglass, who explains in his 1845 slave narrative that learning to read was a conflicted experience, simultaneously enabling and painful. Douglass writes, “I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing.” These powerful words reveal a paradoxical “double-consciousness” inherent in nineteenth-century narratives about literacy: literacy’s capacity to simultaneously imprison and empower. Douglass’s relationship to literacy, both as a character within his narrative and as an author in a historical context, exemplifies the focus of this dissertation.

I borrow my central metaphor from Harriet Jacobs, for whom the chrysalis represents a private, womblike stage early in her writing process, a period of time in which she isolates herself and keeps her literate activities secret from her employers. The chrysalis image, in portending rebirth, also acknowledges literacy as a public act of cultural negotiation. This extraordinary pattern of isolation and rebirth, of chosen confinement and boundary-breaking captures the experience of literacy in the lives of individuals

already marginalized from mainstream society by race, class and gender.

The central tenet of my argument is that literacy is not monolithic; it is not simply a skill that an individual does or doesn't have. Instead, literacy is represented as a process of becoming which moves back and forth in a continuing experience of liberation and imprisonment. I define metaliteracy as the ability to move freely within and among the private and the public experiences of literacy. Metaliteracy is the ability to recognize, manipulate and revise various levels of authoritative discourse through the integration of one's own internally persuasive discourse. In that more sophisticated state, critical literacy becomes a mode of praxis, a means of writing in the world, of righting the world.

I consider works as diverse as Douglass's narrative, Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* and Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*. I draw on literacy scholarship, critical studies in American literature and composition theory to examine the personal, political and economic implications of literacy as a means of self-representation.



## PREFACE

A man's work whether in music, painting or literature is always a portrait of himself.

--Samuel Butler

I can't begin to write about literacy narratives without first telling my own story, since I have come to realize over the course of this dissertation that all of my writing, even the most scholarly and critical, is autobiographical in some sense or another. Perhaps the best place to begin is in the middle, that is, in the midst of my graduate training in the humanities, in the middle of seminars, workshops, writing assignments, teaching responsibilities, enmeshed in a maze of self-centeredness that is a necessary part of any such training. Isolated in my books and buried in my academic pursuits, I frequently felt as if I was building a wall around myself. After all, for most of that time I was only in the early stages of becoming 'critically literate' in my chosen profession. I was still learning how to read; I wasn't quite sure what it took to become a scholarly writer; I still hadn't crossed the threshold into the profession. On top of that, I could say very little to my friends and family about what I did in school. Everyone I knew outside of academia had created this caricature of me as an intellectual. I was the one getting my Ph.D. I was the one who spent days at a time writing and reading, activities many of my friends feared or hated. One of my husband's friends even confessed to me that he had never in his life read a book from cover to cover, ever. In more ways than one, my literate activities separated me from the lives around me.

It was probably this sense of being walled in that pushed me outside the gates of the university and into the streets of my local community, specifically into Exeter, New Hampshire, where I was struck by the emerging contrast

between the finely manicured lawns of historic Philips Exeter Academy and the 70's style brick vocational education center which houses the Exeter Adult Literacy Program. As young men in suits strolled through the campus at Exeter with armloads of books, other young men and women wearing protective goggles in the auto shop at Exeter High School worked with power drills. The contrast of these scenes helped me to understand why I was there--the sense of privilege I sometimes felt in the university and the apparent disconnectedness of my literacies from everyday scenes like machine shops. As I completed my tutor training in the midst of continued studies in the university, I thought a lot about what Jonathan Kozol wrote in *Illiterate America*, that it is the responsibility of people like myself to "cross borders, and to participate in unfamiliar, openly political assaults on societal injustice." Otherwise, he argues, "there will be no potential advocates for the illiterate, no written expositions to be read by a society that manages to segregate its victims and anesthetize itself to the persistence of anguish it has sealed away in celluloid containers" (23).

Within a few weeks I had met the young man I would tutor in reading and writing. He was a big, strong athletic guy, a high school graduate. He had a good job in the shipping department of a local manufacturer. He drove a brand new Ford F-150 truck with a vanity plate sporting his last name which he always parked around the corner from our meeting place because he didn't want anyone to know about our tutoring sessions. Though he graduated from high school, Ned told me that he pretty much joked his way through English class in high school; he'd find out the plot of novels from girls in the class and yell out answers to questions, even though he never read the text. In fact, Ned told me he had never in his life read a book from cover to cover, ever.

I met with Ned weekly for a year, working on his reading and his writing, breaking down words into parts to try and pronounce them, putting together pieces of various freewriting exercises into a finished essay. His reading level was probably that of an eighth-grader. He loved sports, so we read aloud from the sports section of the local newspaper and from *Sports Illustrated*, some of the best writing I have ever come across. He wrote an essay about meeting his girlfriend, who graduated from an Ivy League college. We worked on writing assignments for his job, including a memo inviting all interested parties to sign up for the softball team. And he read a book from cover to cover, Larry Bird's *Drive*.

During the time I worked with Ned I began to understand a lot of things I only abstractly understood through my university studies. I saw the intimate relationship that existed between class and literacy; I witnessed the embarrassment and frustration of being unable to read fluently; I understood the courage it took to attempt to change that reality; and I saw firsthand how literacy can be empowering and alienating. One event in particular stands out in my mind. Ned had complained regularly about his boss, who once penalized Ned for being insubordinate by docking him a day's pay. Ned came to our meeting one day upset at what he considered an unfair evaluation from his boss, holding in his hand a blank sheet which allowed him the opportunity to provide his own side of the story, to perform a self-evaluation. That day we put aside what we had planned and worked together on a detailed analysis of specific events that attested to how well Ned performed his duties. He explained that many times he was not where he was supposed to be because he had finished his allotted task and had gone to help a co-worker with the extra time he had. He listed a series of tasks he had performed which were not

required of him as part of his job; he argued that they illustrated his effort to be part of a team, to go above and beyond what was required of him. I could sense Ned's attitude of defeat when he walked in with that blank sheet of paper, before he realized that he could use his literacy as a means of resisting this treatment; I also witnessed his confidence when he returned the next week to tell me that his boss had read the writing he had done and had been forced to reconsider the evaluation. In this instance, his ability to write really had given him some power. And it made me feel empowered too, in a way that little of my scholarly research ever had. After listening to stories of this boss penalizing Ned, I got mad. It felt good to be able to help him use his literacy to fight that kind of unfair treatment. It also reminded me that along with the walls my own education has tended to build around me and as much as it has won me respect from people who associate literacy with power, my literateness has enabled me to help open doors for people like Ned. As Jonathan Kozol claims, "academic humanists are potentially the most effective allies for illiterate people who have been denied, above and beyond all other forms of wealth and opportunity, the richness and amplitude of the humanist tradition, one which may be carried on to future ages by no other vehicle so fragile as the written word."

I've gone into such detail about my own story because I have since come to realize that the authors of the literacy narratives written in nineteenth-century America which form the basis of this dissertation reach many of the same conclusions about what it means to be literate; threads of a common story about literacy emerge in these narratives and dovetail with my own process of developing literateness. At the center of that story of developing literateness is the understanding that inhering in true acts of critical literacy is

a sense of social responsibility, a belief that ultimately literacy needs to be connected to praxis, to acting in the world. Living in a culture which denied them political rights, African-Americans and women used literacy as a means of reaching out to other individuals who needed protection, to create a community through the literate act. As Patrocinio Schweickart says about feminist criticism, the aim of literacy, of acts of reading and writing, is “to change the world.” That responsibility is perhaps the most important but least acknowledged aspect of literacy.

I am, however, equally as conscious of the other, less hopeful side of the literacy coin. By that I mean the way that becoming literate forces individuals not only to master the rules of language, but also to come to a greater understanding of their relationship to the world they live in, a relationship that can be lonely, embarrassing and paralyzing. I have already mentioned the sense of empowerment both Ned and I felt at his developing literacy. But it was never all that simple. Shortly thereafter, around Christmas of that same year, he came to a tutoring session and told me that he didn’t want to continue any more. He was pretty reticent about why; I could sense he was frustrated. He gave me a bottle of Kahlua as a thank you present. It was neatly wrapped with a red bow.

I was disappointed, but for some odd reason, not surprised. The tutoring was getting a lot harder than I had expected and our progress had been excruciatingly slow. I suspect he began to feel as if learning to read better really didn’t matter all that much. I spent the requisite time wondering if I had done something wrong, but as I look back on it now, it seems more likely that something had happened in Ned’s relationship with his girlfriend, the one from the Ivy League college. She had been thinking about moving to Boston, and

their relationship seemed to have been on the rocks. I wondered what it meant if he had decided to discontinue his tutoring because of that relationship, perhaps because the relationship had ended. And then I realized just how complicated the issue of literacy was for him, and the extent to which it was connected to things that are entirely unacademic, like his future relationships and his place in the world, class issues and a desire to please other people. It's funny, but in understanding those things, it was like I was peering through a two-way mirror: I was looking at someone else, but I could also see myself, my life, reflecting back at me.

I never saw Ned again after that final tutoring session. I think about him a lot though. I wonder if he's still reading *Sports Illustrated*, if he's gotten any more books out of the library. I look for his truck when I drive around town. I suppose I continue to think about him because he taught me things about literacy from which my academic training seemed so disconnected. Most importantly, my relationship with Ned has made me sensitive to my own position of privilege and my responsibility to continue to build the kind of bridges which allow stories like his to inform the work that I do within the walls of the university; it has also made me realize what it means that some of those attempts will fail, even in succeeding.

Audre Lorde has said that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." I always want to revise that notion, to argue in my eternal optimism that you *can* learn to use literacy as a tool to fight to change the world. But I also realize now that the house itself has many more rooms than I ever imagined. And that is what this dissertation is all about--it's about opening up the literate spaces of Frederick Douglass, Fanny Fern and Harriet

Jacobs and Louisa May Alcott and peering with them through windows, doors and peepholes to understand literacy's power and to accept its pain.

## INTRODUCTION

### "Learning to Read"

Very soon the Yankee teachers  
Came down and set up school  
But, oh! the Rebs did hate it,--  
It was agin' their rule.

Our masters always tried to hide  
Book learning from our eyes;  
Knowledge didn't agree with slavery--  
'Twould make us all too wise.

But some of us would try to steal  
A little from the book,  
And put the words together  
and lean by hook or crook.

I remember Uncle Caldwell,  
Who took pot liquor fat  
And greased the pages of his book,  
And hid it in his hat.

And had his master ever seen  
The leaves upon his head,  
He'd have thought them greasy papers,  
But nothing to be read.

And there was Mrs. Turner's Ben,  
Who heard the children spell,  
And picked the words right up by heart,  
And learned to read 'em well.

Well, the Northern folks kept sending,  
The Yankee teachers down;  
And they stood right up and helped us  
Though Rebs did sneer and frown.

And I longed to read my Bible,  
For precious words it said;  
But when I begun to learn it,  
Folks just shook their heads,

And said there is no use trying,  
Oh! Chloe, you're too late;  
But as I was rising sixty,  
I had no time to wait.

So I got a pair of glasses,  
And straight to work I went,  
And never stopped till I could read  
The hymns and Testament.

Then I got a little cabin--  
A place to call my own--  
And I felt as independent  
As the queen upon her throne.

--Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, 1873

Reading enabled me to utter my thoughts, and to meet the arguments brought forward to sustain slavery, but while [it] relieved me of one difficulty, [it] brought on another even more painful. The more I read, the more I was led to detest my enslavers . . . As I writhed under it, I would at times feel that *learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing*. It had given me a new view of my wretched condition, without the remedy. It had opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but to no ladder upon which to get out. In moments of agony, I envied my fellow slaves for their stupidity. The silver trump of freedom had roused my soul to eternal wakefulness (279).

--Frederick Douglass, 1845



One of the most pervasive myths in American society has emerged from our reverence for literacy, specifically, the belief that literacy provides access to personal empowerment and the consequent assumption that mass illiteracy poses a grave danger to our society. As recently as September of 1993, for example, the U.S. Department of Education announced results of the most comprehensive study of literacy ever undertaken in the United States. The results: almost half of the adults in our country--nearly 90 million Americans--are barely literate. The conclusions drawn from the study are familiar aspects of what historian Harvey Graff calls the literacy myth: that higher levels of individual literacy lead to greater income and employment levels; that illiterate American workers lag behind more qualified workers from other western nations. In short, the mythology surrounding literacy equates the ability to read and write with personal accomplishment and links national literacy levels with America's ability to compete in worldwide markets.

Compare the literacy myth--based on assumptions about what the individual's *ability to read and write* means to society--with the archetypal image associated with the *act of literacy*: that is, the isolated individual alone in a garret receiving inspiration from an internal source, emerging from her ivory tower with a finished, perfect literary product. Put side by side, these two myths embrace contrary understandings of literacy. The first sees literacy as essentially utilitarian, a concrete skill necessary for economic health and cultural progress, an expertise one needs to become a contributing member of American society. The second emphasizes literacy as a romantic experience of artistic inspiration, a process which essentially transcends the influence of society and culture. The former focuses on the social aspects of literacy; the latter on the private experience of engaging in a literary act. Both myths

assume literacy is empowering to the individual who masters it.<sup>1</sup>

A myth is a widely held belief whose truth is accepted uncritically. The purpose of this study is to question some of the widely accepted 'truths' about literacy, to look more closely at the way individual narratives reinforce or revise definitions of literacy posed by scholars from a variety of disciplines in order to more fully understand the role literacy plays in the lives of individual members of American society. Part of this process involves questioning widely accepted truths. But it is also important to acknowledge and reexamine the implications of the truths embedded in our myths about literacy.

This study looks at literacy through the lens of literacy narratives, which are stories that dramatize characters' ongoing struggles with the acquisition and/or loss of literacy. These struggles play themselves out on economic, political and cultural levels and they have many private and public consequences. Literacy narratives are fictional and non-fictional texts from a variety of genres. As such, they fit into a wide range of literary traditions. Many of these texts are part of the bildungsroman tradition, or narrative of education. One particular kind of bildungsroman that Janet Carey Eldred describes is the narrative of socialization, a story that "chronicles a character's attempt to enter a new social (and discursive) arena." As Eldred reminds us, "many texts, especially coming of age stories, show characters negotiating the world around them, and often contain detailed and insightful investigations of how language is acquired and how it creates particular regional and private identities" (513). Literacy narratives are also included in what Mary Louise Pratt calls literature of the contact zone, which she describes as fiction authored in colonial contexts or out of colonial histories. These narratives "study the particular problems of forcing a sanctioned

literacy on colonialized subjects and examine” writing about the self “as a means of resisting legislated representations” (513).

This study spans the decades before and after the Civil War, exploring the impact of revolutionary political conditions, particularly the experience of slavery, on literacy. Because this was the period when mass literacy first became a primary goal in the United States, it is rich in narratives about literacy. Following Cathy Davidson’s thesis in *Revolution and the Word* that early American novels represented the concerns of those without political representation, I explore the role of literacy narratives in representing concerns of marginalized individuals who were denied political representation before and after the Civil War. This study illustrates the complex way in which literacy functioned as a system of representation in the struggle to “define a self” for writers marginalized from mainstream culture because of factors such as race and gender, factors which have historically denied them access to political representation.

In an effort to bring together its private and public aspects, I discuss literacy as existing along a continuum from the individual to the social. At one end, literacy is an individual act of self-representation, a means of defining the self; at the other, it is a metaphor for the ability (or inability) to imagine or construct a narrative which defies the patriarchal or master narrative. Part of that social aspect includes understanding literacy as means of participation in the public sphere, a public sphere which may include a market economy, in which literacy is a form of economic activity; a moral economy, in which literacy is a means of negotiating cultural values; or a political economy, in which literacy is a means of political representation. It is considerably more difficult, but equally important, to acknowledge the private experience of

literacy, which often occurs in isolation. Because the private aspect of literacy is much less visible and much more mysterious, it frequently escapes our purview. The many layers and extremes of the private-public, literal-metaphoric continuum are addressed in each of the narratives.

This study looks at six narratives, ranging from autobiography to fiction: Frederick Douglass's 1845 autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* as well as Douglass's subsequent published revisions of the narrative, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, written in 1855 and the 1881 text, *The Life and Time of Frederick Douglass*; Harriet Jacobs's 1861 novelized slave narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*; Susan Warner's sentimental novel *The Wide, Wide World* (1850); Fanny Fern's autobiographical novel, *Ruth Hall* (1854); Louisa May Alcott's children's novel *Little Women* (1869); and Henry James's classic, *The Portrait of a Lady* (1882).

I have chosen these particular narratives for a host of reasons. On a purely practical level they all deal explicitly with reading and writing. Literacy is an important theme in nearly all slave narratives, but Frederick Douglass's slave narrative is *the* quintessential literacy narrative. I frankly couldn't conceive of doing a study of literacy narratives without exploring the richness of a text that has been at the center of contemporary critical conversations about literacy. Each of the other selections grew out of that first choice, in a domino-like effect. While Douglass's narrative deals primarily with his public struggles with literacy, Harriet Jacobs's narrative illuminates many of the private and exclusively female dilemmas of literacy. Fanny Fern's and Louisa May Alcott's novels add to Jacobs's emerging portrait of the woman writer. They each address the economic consequences of literacy for women, though Alcott's novel is more explicitly about reading. Susan Warner's text is also

centrally about reading, though in its emphasis on religious literacy it relates more directly to Douglass's text. In essence, I chose these particular texts because they all seemed to be speaking to one another.

*The Portrait of a Lady* suggested itself because it was so thoroughly and so obviously concerned with painting a different portrait of female literacy and because the tragedy of the novel is directly attributable to a *failure* of literacy. Many of James's later novels and short stories deal with issues of literacy, but this early novel illuminates James's own process of developing literateness and his anxieties as a young writer before he became highly successful. Admittedly, there are many other texts that could easily have been included. To my mind that speaks to the validity of the study itself and provides important avenues of further inquiry.

In my reading of each of these narratives, I maintain a dual focus, looking at both the literate activities of writer-characters and the literacies of their writer-authors. Therefore, in addition to exploring the narratives themselves, I also consider biographical information about the authors, using such information to further my close readings. All literacy narratives, even purely fictional texts like James's novel, are in some way connected to the author's identity as a writer by virtue of the fact that they examine the very activity the writer is engaged in. In addressing the experiences of reading and writing they become self-reflexive acts of literacy. They therefore constitute, if only indirectly, autobiographical acts.

Literacy narratives are places where writers explore what Victor Turner calls "liminal crossings" between worlds. As Mary Soliday explains it: "In focusing on those moments when the self is on the threshold of possible intellectual, social and emotional development, literacy narratives become

sites of self-translation where writers can articulate meaning about and the consequences of their passages between language worlds” (511). The metaphor of crossing borders or thresholds, of looking through windows or peepholes separating different worlds, and the role that literacy plays in negotiating those architectural divides emerge repeatedly in these narratives about literacy, since acts of reading and writing prohibit as well as allow movement across cultural boundaries. In each of these narratives, literate acts are described by or occur within or across the borders of architectural spaces such as closets, garrets, windows and peepholes. The process of negotiating these spaces serves as a metaphor for the function of literacy in the lives of individuals marginalized from mainstream culture.

Perhaps the most important image of boundary, the one that has provided my title, “Emerging From the Chrysalis,” comes in a letter from escaped slave Harriet Jacobs to her Quaker friend Amy Post dated March 1854. In that letter Jacobs explains that though she is in the process of writing the story of her life as a slave, she has completed very little of the manuscript because her duties as a nanny and housekeeper leave it “hard to find time to write [sic] as yet I have not written a single word by daylight . . . just now the poor book is in its Chrysalis stage and though I can never make it a butterfly I am satisfied to have it creep among some of the humbler bugs” (238). Jacobs’s use of the chrysalis metaphor to describe her experience of literacy captures many important aspects of her writing process, among them the extended period of isolation and secrecy Jacobs endured in trying to write her narrative. The chrysalis stage of development is the period of immobility in which the caterpillar isolates and transforms itself; the image deftly captures Jacobs’s experience of writing her narrative at night, under cover of

darkness, and her efforts to keep her writing a secret from her employers.

While Harriet Jacobs uses the chrysalis image to describe a stage in the process of writing her “book,” the metaphor also captures the complex and often contradictory experiences of literacy depicted in the other literacy narratives which make up this study. The chrysalis image is a portentous image of boundary, an experience of isolation, a period of metaphorical incubation and development from which a creative and liberatory act emerges. While it is also a period of entrapment, the imprisonment is a chosen though tenuous holding period, an organic experience of growth and development which culminates with the butterfly’s reemergence, in full color, with wings, able to fly. It is this extraordinary pattern of isolation and rebirth, of chosen confinement and boundary-breaking, which captures the experience of literacy in the lives of individuals already marginalized from mainstream society by factors such as race, class and gender.

The central tenet of my argument is that literacy is not monolithic; it is not simply a skill that an individual does or doesn’t have. Instead, literacy is repeatedly represented as a process of becoming which moves back and forth in a continuing experience of liberation and imprisonment. To borrow a way of thinking about literacy from Cathy Davidson, “literacy is a process, not a fixed point or a line of demarcation. ‘Literateness’ is a more useful term . . . since it suggests a continuum . . . between, say, rudimentary reading and elementary ciphering, on the one hand, and the sophisticated use of literacy for one’s material, intellectual, and political advantage” (60-61). In that more sophisticated state, critical literacy becomes a mode of praxis, a means of writing in the world, of righting the world.

Jacobs’s chrysalis image is refigured in many important ways by the

individual narratives themselves, in other related images of boundary connected to the experience of literacy. My epigraph, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's poem "Learning to Read" ends with a literate Aunt Chloe retreating to the isolation of her cabin to read the Bible: "Then I got a little cabin/A place to call my own--/And I felt as independent/As the queen upon her throne." Clearly, Aunt Chloe's ability to read represents an act of liberation for her since literacy, as the poem describes, was "agin [the] rule" of the white slaveholders. Chloe's position on her throne, inside her cabin, characterizes literacy as a means of retreat and transcendence from the oppressive slave culture. Similar images occur throughout these narratives, attesting to the necessary protection afforded by such isolation. For example, Josephine March, the writer-character at the center of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, retreats from the domestic duties of her family to her garret to eat apples and read romance novels. James's heroine Isabel Archer isolates herself in her grandmother's library. Fanny Fern's alter-ego Ruth Hall shuts herself off from the painful reality of poverty, scribbling away by candlelight.

Ultimately, through the use of these metaphors and their constant reconfigurations, these texts argue that literacy is a process of constant negotiation between separate spheres and involves a dynamic attempt to bring the personal and the public, the social and the private into some kind of a workable relationship. Perhaps the most important reconfiguration of this metaphor of literacy is in the experience of maternity, or mothering, which is itself a pattern of isolation or boundary, and ultimately of border crossing through birth. Repeatedly, these texts represent literacy as an extension of the process of mothering. In other words, literacy is frequently motivated by a writer's identity as a mother and it involves a sometimes painful process of



moving beyond a singular and individual motivation to a broader, more public sense of moral or social responsibility. I don't mean to suggest through the use of this metaphor that mothering and literacy are the same thing. They are not. Certainly literacy, unlike maternity, is not an exclusively female experience. What I am suggesting is that the representation of mothering in these texts acted as a heuristic that allowed me access to a more theoretical kind of thinking about literacy. The central physical transformation that occurs in motherhood, the movement back and forth between a singular consciousness to a double or multiple consciousness does replicate the psychological pattern of the literate experience.

For example, both Linda Brent and Ruth Hall write out of a sense of duty--Ruth out of a desire to feed her children, Jacobs out of a desire to help other women in slavery. Both acknowledge their acts of writing as public, but both also recognize the need for periods of privacy and isolation before literate acts can emerge. Likewise for Jo March, who, in the process of *Little Women*, redefines literacy from being an experience of self-reliance or isolation to literacy as an extension of the mothering she performs on her sister's deathbed. Similarly, Frederick Douglass's literacy is at first lonely and alienating, but eventually the sense of responsibility for his brethren in bonds becomes the motivating force in his literate acts. Each of these processes of emerging literacy, then, move back and forth in a constant dialectic of isolation and community, narcissism and mothering, self-reliance and social responsibility.<sup>2</sup>

Literacy narratives "both challenge and affirm culturally scripted ideas about literacy" (Eldred and Mortensen 513). As literacy historians have

explained, the cultural script about literacy in the middle decades of nineteenth century America was full of important dramas, for this was the period in American history that witnessed the “democratization” of literacy as a result of the emergence of a national publishing industry. Well into the nineteenth century, publishing had been a risky, provincial undertaking, but various factors combined to create a revolution in literacy in America, beginning with the massive economic growth enjoyed by the country since 1820. Important mechanical developments in the printing press and revolutions in the transportation industry resulted in the professionalization of authorship and the commodification of literacy by the 1840’s. Spurred by the development in American education toward the “common school” and the drive for universal literacy, literacy rates among white Americans were estimated to have been more than 90% in 1840 (Kelley 6-12).

According to Dana Nelson Salvino, white literacy was deemed necessary and valuable because it was believed that “teaching the lower classes to read and write would ensure greater political stability for the community (i.e. they won’t steal from us) and the nation (i.e. they won’t overthrow us)” (144). American education for the white majority wasn’t liberatory as much as it simply reinforced social hierarchies. “[Literacy] did not encourage students to create their own possibilities as much as it enumerated and defined those possibilities in a way that taught the student his or her social place” (144). Ironically, at the very same time in our nation’s history that mass literacy was becoming a primary goal in the development of a democratic union, laws were being enacted in several Southern states making it a crime to teach slaves to read or write. It was for the very same reason--to maintain the social hierarchy of slavery--that literacy was denied to slaves.

The narratives of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs take on important political implications when we realize that literacy in pre-Civil war America was racialized from the perspective of the white majority: in the hands of white educators teaching the white populace, literacy was deemed a necessary tool for the subordination and proper training of a democratic citizenry; in the hands of slaves, literacy was a dangerous tool capable of inciting unrest. On the one hand, literacy would ensure proper moral training and maintain a benevolent populace; on the other hand it would incite murderous revolutions. As Salvino explains:

The ideology of literacy became much more powerfully discriminating during this period. At a time when literacy became 'secularized' and magnified in its cultural efficacy--literacy as a means to morality, citizenship and prosperity--and when the nation was investing avidly in its own economic prosperity, then especially were blacks denied access to literacy. Literacy had by then been made into a very real enslaving weapon against blacks; legitimated into illiteracy, they were held chattel by the power of words in the form of laws legalizing their bondage and tracts conferring their inherent inferiority to whites. (147)

This irony and the peculiar difficulties of writing about slavery are highlighted by Douglass and Jacobs. The novels of Warner and Fern reveal similar ironies in American attitudes about gender and literacy. Reading in particular was considered a potentially dangerous activity for women unless it was associated with religious training. Fern's narrative makes clear that writing, as an act of self-assertion, was considered unladylike in a time when complete submission was expected of women. The repeated admonishments against novels and magazines by Ellen Montgomery's brother John in Warner's novel remind us that reading was an equally suspect activity among women since novels (especially seduction novels which could ruin young women) were thought to interfere with a woman's piety and domestic

responsibilities, two of the four cardinal virtues of the cultural script.<sup>3</sup>

Warner's novel makes it clear that the nineteenth century's disapproval of women reading and writing had its roots in religious ideology.

The massive changes in America's literary landscape during the early nineteenth century ultimately gave rise to debates about the benefits and drawbacks of literacy for the American public, somewhat like contemporary debates about the dangers of television. Discussions abounded on the "fiction question," leading to a moral panic about the potentially dangerous effects of dime novels and "sensational" literature on the nineteenth century reading public. For example, public library discussions in the 1870's reflected a struggle between those of the "censorship model" who desired to reform and direct working class reading by limiting access to sensational fiction and providing more "wholesome" literature and those of the "consumership model" who argued that libraries should provide free access to whatever kind of fiction the working class demanded. Michael Denning reads this debate over appropriate reading material as a social conflict over relations between the dominant genteel culture and the new commercial mass culture (47-50). The underlying assumption of those seeking to limit access to sensational fiction was that access to certain kinds of texts had the potential to deceive and to corrupt.

Debates about what belonged on the shelves of America's libraries and in the hands of America's middle-class women and suspicions about the corruptive powers of literacy were similar to those which had occurred decades earlier in the Southern states with regard to Bible literacy and slavery. During the 1840's, intense conflict developed in southern states over whether or not slaves should be literate. The conflict centered on religious literacy and slaves'

access to the Bible. Benevolent societies embarked on a “Bibles for Slaves” campaign, arguing that all slaves should have Bibles and that a literate population was necessary for a Christian and democratic nation. These societies, bolstered by Northern abolitionists, argued that the Bible had the potential to unify and reform and thus guarantee social order in troubled times. Opponents believed that such demands interfered with slaveholder rights; they feared that literate slaves could potentially incite slave revolts. By 1860, however, most organized efforts for slave literacy had dried up, because of growing conflicts emerging after John Brown’s raid (Cornelius 125-141), though the conflicts over access to literacy remained.

As this backdrop illustrates, the nineteenth century was a time of complex attitudes and contradictory assumptions about literacy which had to do with race, gender, class, with politics and perhaps most centrally, with issues of power and authority. These are precisely the kinds of issues which the narratives themselves take up; in doing so, the voices of marginalized individuals add important details to our developing portrait of literacy.

In the introduction to his important study of literacy in the nineteenth-century city, *The Literacy Myth*, historian Harvey Graff surveys existing research on literacy and concludes that the volume and pace of empirical studies of historical literacy continue to increase dramatically, with continued debate among historians about the implications of these studies as well as the benefits and drawbacks of various methods of measuring literacy levels. Indeed, literacy rates in America have been well documented by studies as diverse as Kenneth Lockridge’s *Literacy in Colonial New England* and the above-mentioned study done by the U.S. Department of Education, considered

the most comprehensive study of literacy ever done on Americans.

Literacy, however is not only measured quantitatively and as Graff acknowledges in his introduction, qualitative questions “may ultimately be of greater consequence” in our efforts to fully understand the meaning of literacy in our society. Graff argues that it is important to move beyond the numerical data compiled by social historians and to begin to consider the ways in which literacy intersects with social, political, economic, cultural, and psychological life. Quantitative materials, Graff argues, “yield only a certain return no matter how cleverly they are exploited. The parameters of literacy’s relationships are too broad, and questions of motivation, perceptions, institutions and culture are not always amenable to numerical inquiry. The quality of individual literacy, finally, can be directly derived from rare sources” (16-17). Graff mentions the value of literary approaches to the study of literacy, arguing that “we are better served by a marriage of approaches, combining sources and methods toward a more complete analysis of literacy” (17).

This study is such a marriage: an attempt to flesh out empirical and theoretical studies on literacy with research in American literature and composition theory. As Janet Carey Eldred and Peter Mortensen argue in “Reading Literacy Narratives,” literacy studies need to move in one important direction, that is, into an exploration of literary texts. “Literacy studies can enrich literary criticism, yet this connection remains to date largely unexplored” (512). Indeed, many of the social historians’ insights about literacy and the function of reading and writing at specific historical moments can open up rich avenues of discussion for literary studies.

In addition, contemporary composition theory has been slow to

historicize, as evidenced by Ann Gere's call for research in the "extracurriculum of composition," which she describes as "extend[ing] beyond the academy to encompass the multiple contexts in which persons seek to improve their writing . . . [and] focus[ing] on the experiences of writers not always visible to us inside the walls of the academy" (80). As Gere argues, the historiography of composition studies has generally looked inside classroom walls and has only recently begun to widen its scope beyond a narrative of professionalization. Even her accounts of writing workshops which occur outside the boundaries of formal education and thus "uncouple composition and schooling" (80) still focus on pedagogical activities, though self-sponsored. The texts explored in this study are even further removed from the traditional focus of composition studies because, though historical, they are completely divorced from any kind of schooling. This study looks at written texts detailing processes of developing literacy by individuals whose literacy was frequently acquired outside of, and many times even in direct defiance of, sanctioned pedagogical interaction.

It is against this background of scholarly border crossing and shifting angles of vision that my study emerges, looking at individual stories about literacy written in nineteenth-century America. The study acknowledges literacy as a concrete skill which can be measured and evaluated, but also moves beyond that to understand the way literacy, as a system of representation, also influences the construction of selfhood. The process of emerging literacy involves a whole series of relationships between and individual and the discourses and conceptual frameworks she chooses to employ or to subvert. The outcome of this process depends upon an individual's skill in negotiating and/or manipulating the system of

representation, which itself can create and destroy a sense of self. This study is part of a larger conversation in American letters about the individual's search for a sense of self. In adding to that conversation and acknowledging the specific role that literacy plays in the construction of identity, it draws on the insights of composition theorists, particularly discussions about the social, political and cultural factors which affect an individual's struggle with language acquisition.

Many of the questions I raise above have been explored in great detail already by a host of scholars from various disciplines. However, while I am listening to a variety of disparate scholarly narratives about reading and writing occurring simultaneously in different spaces in the academy, my methodology is primarily one of close reading. I am aware of, and constantly draw upon strands of various critical conversations, but it is more important in this study to be sensitive to and to foreground the subtleties of the stories themselves, to clear a central space which gives cultural outsiders the authority to speak without letting scholarly voices drown out or obliterate their meaning. Ultimately, I hope this study will create a new space for these personal narratives and that it will open doors, windows or perhaps, as the experience of Harriet Jacobs's own literacy suggests, loopholes, between conversations occurring in different rooms of the academy and between different cultural and historical moments.

I call upon a variety of critical sources, including post-structuralism, feminism, reader-response criticism, theories of the black vernacular and autobiography theory, among others. However, rather than asking what can be learned *about* literacy narratives by applying theoretical and historical knowledge, I want to look at what can be learned *from* literacy narratives



about our theories and histories. In other words, I do not use these various critical approaches as templates in the process of performing my analysis. Instead, I am more interested in using the narratives as means of critiquing and/or revising notions put forth by various critical perspectives and scholars of literacy in general. At the same time, an understanding of the cultural history of nineteenth-century literacy is necessary for a full reading of these narratives.

This study is organized chronologically, beginning with Frederick Douglass's 1845 narrative in the chapter "Writing in the Spaces Left: Literacy as a Process of Becoming in the Narratives of Frederick Douglass." Douglass's text is thus set up as the "norm" in this study of literacy, as the paradigmatic literacy narrative, because it most clearly addresses the complexities of the topic. In addition, because the study looks closely at Douglass's subsequent revisions and expansion in 1855 and 1881, Douglass's literacy narrative acts as a historical and organizational frame for the important issues to be picked up in later chapters. For example, Douglass chronicles the acquisition of the skills of reading and writing as a slave and the ambivalence he frequently feels about his mastery of those skills. Douglass clearly understands the value of literacy, but at the same time he is painfully aware of its limitations. Ultimately, Douglass's process of maturing literateness over the years after his escape from slavery reveals his understanding that for the slave, so many opposing ideologies and cultures of literacy existed simultaneously in antebellum America that it is impossible to sort them out in any permanent way. Moreover, after his escape from slavery, Douglass addresses the issue of literacy in a broader context relevant

to changing political conditions. In response to this complex situation, Douglass constantly shifts his perspective on literacy, to maneuver his literate actions both inside and outside the southern slave culture and to literally acquire his literacy from a hidden position in the margins, metaphorically represented by his act of writing “in the spaces left” of his young master’s copy book.

Chapter II, titled “To Sorrow or Rebel?: Literacy as Economic and Religious Salvation in *Ruth Hall* and *The Wide, Wide World*” explores the literate experiences of Ellen Montgomery, the child at the center of Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* and of Ruth Hall, the authoress in Fanny Fern’s autobiographical novel of the same name. In continuing to build on the continuum of literateness set up in the previous chapter, the study refines its understanding of literacy by acknowledging several important distinctions. First, through an exploration of Ellen’s acts of reading (for she writes very little), this chapter questions whether the ethic of submission dictated by her religious literacy denies her any hope of using her literacy as a means of self-representation or if, as Jane Tompkins claims in *Sensational Designs*, such literacy is empowering in its transcendence. I look specifically at Tompkins’s claim that “the implantation of virtue was the primary goal of nearly everything nineteenth-century Americans read” (157). Like Douglass, who in the final pages of his narrative exposes the oppressive logic of applying a Christian ethic of submission to the experience of slaves, Ellen suffers overwhelmingly at the hands of a Christian society which required complete submission and which used Bible literacy as a means to maintain and to justify its oppression. In this sense, Ellen’s experience of literacy illustrates that there are different levels or kinds of literacy and while an individual may

progress along one level of the continuum, becoming highly literate on a technical level, she may simultaneously be critically illiterate, unable to use her literacy as a means of developing beyond a state of religious narcissism. Instead of using literacy to construct a sense of her own identity, Ellen becomes the victim of religious censorship, warned against novels and magazines, reading the Bible furiously, and never venturing to take up the pen.

On the other hand, Ruth Hall emerges as a professional writer who uses her literacy as a means of acquiring economic independence and as a means of publicizing the inequities suffered by women in the nineteenth-century city. Literacy thus functions for her as a commodity and as a method of self-representation, a way for Fern to tell her own story in a society which denied women political representation. But while Fern's novel acknowledges literacy's capacity for economic empowerment, it also chronicles, as Douglass's narrative does, the alienation of the marginalized writer. The fact that Ellen is a child and Ruth is a mother, that Ellen is motherless and Ruth's literacy is inextricably linked to her identity as a mother, opens the door for the discussion of the relationship between mothering or altruism and critical literacy.

The complex relationship between patriarchy, motherhood and women's literacy explored in *Ruth Hall* is at the center of Chapter III, "From Chrysalis to Butterfly: *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* as Literary Metamorphosis" written by Harriet Jacobs.<sup>4</sup> Despite feelings of alienation similar to those experienced by Fanny Fern, Jacobs not only manages to write and assume control of the production of her own narrative after her escape from slavery, but in her experiences as a slave Jacobs's pseudonymous self, Linda Brent, repeatedly manipulates literacy to her own advantage. In the narrative, Linda

is forced to *feign illiteracy*--the state traditionally used to victimize slaves--pretending that she cannot read in order to avoid the lecherous advances of a master who writes her perverse letters. Linda's master attempts to use her literacy as an avenue of victimization, but she transforms illiteracy into a protective shield.

Chapter IV, titled "*Little Women's* Literary Lessons," traces the literacy of the nineteenth century's best loved female writer-character, Josephine March. This chapter traces Jo's developing literateness, her conflict between literacy and domesticity, and ultimately, her success in infusing the isolation of the chrysalis with the inspiration of her family. Louisa May Alcott weaves a sophisticated narrative about reading and writing into *Little Women*. At first, writing is a means of escape from family duties, but it becomes transformed into an act which infuses literacy with a larger concern for the family. In this sense, Jo March feminizes literacy, in much the same way that other writer-characters move beyond the isolating and narcissistic potential of literacy to infuse it with a sense of social responsibility. When Jo marries Professor Bhaer, she substitutes motherhood and/or a moral economy, sexual reproduction, for literacy as economic reproduction.

By situating Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* (1882) on the margins of my study in the final chapter, "The Master Learns to Read: *The Portrait of a Lady* as Literacy Narrative," I am repositioning the novel from the center of the American literary canon to an outsider status. More specifically, I use the narratives of Douglass and Jacobs and the novels of Warner, Fern and Alcott to construct a literacy paradigm *against which* James's novel is read. This chapter illustrates the study's overall effort to resist our tendencies to separate literary texts. By putting James next to

Douglass, to explore literacy across racial and canonical borders, this study engages in what Myra Jehlen calls a method of radical comparitivism, “a method of talking about literature by men and women, blacks and whites, together rather than separately” (qtd. in Ammons 12).

*The Portrait of a Lady* has traditionally been read as a bildungsroman. Isabel Archer is seen by many critics as an independent and intellectual female character, whose habit of reading has been understood as an integral part of her education and development. If we reread the novel as a literacy narrative, viewing Isabel Archer as a reader in the context of the paradoxes of literacy outlined above, we recognize that Isabel *refuses to write* throughout the novel. She can thus be seen as a character whose lack of “authority” in the novel is directly attributable to her failed “authorship” and her dangerous reading habit of confusing romance with reality. Other characters believe Isabel’s habit of shutting herself up in the library and reading romances makes her “cultured.” But when a series of “misreadings” literally blind Isabel to reality, the tragedy of her life can be seen as directly attributable to her failed literacy, to her inability to imagine or construct a narrative which rescues her from the stories other characters have written for her. By placing James’s *The Portrait of a Lady* in the literacy narrative tradition, we see how James’s house of fiction, discussed in the Preface to the novel, prefigures Isabel Archer’s entrapment and the failures of literacy which lead to her tragedy. Read against this background, Henry James’s text reveals that ultimately it is Isabel Archer’s failure to become critically literate, to move beyond narcissism to a larger sense of the self in the world, that leads to the tragedy of her life.<sup>5</sup>

## NOTES FOR INTRODUCTION

1. I discuss the public and the private as two separate myths here, but in many ways they are two parts of a same experience which merge into other powerful American myths. For example, the American “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” mythology of self-reliance and the “American Dream” both depend, like literacy, on an individual’s ability to transcend her circumstances through hard work, like the writer isolated in her ivory tower. The internal motivation and hard work of a character like Horatio Alger’s Ragged Dick results in economic empowerment as well as a moral character and individual satisfaction. The cultural assumptions about literacy thus mirror those of the “American Dream,” and thus have both private and public aspects.

2. My early thinking about the paradox of literacy as both empowering and disabling, both personal and social, has been informed by two important philosophical perspectives on double-consciousness which frame the historical reach of this study acting as a foundation for its exploration of literacy. Ralph Waldo Emerson, writing in the 1840’s when Frederick Douglass’s first narrative appeared, espouses through his doctrine of idealism and self-reliance an empowering experience of isolation which speaks to one aspect of literacy. Moreover, in his 1843 essay, “The Transcendentalist” Emerson first employs the term “double-consciousness” to characterize difficulties of attempting to maintain a transcendental perspective, much like the isolated writer in her garret. For Emerson, double-consciousness meant being pulled in divergent directions simultaneously. The upward pull meant desiring a sense of communion with the divine, which was in opposition to the downward pull of daily life in society. For Emerson, the individual and the social were in opposition; the goal was a unified, transcendent sense of self.

Writing at the turn of the century, shortly after the publication of James’s *The Portrait of a Lady* (the final chapter of this study), W.E.B. Du Bois redefines Emerson’s notion of double-consciousness in addressing the peculiar difficulties of self-reliance for the African American during Reconstruction. Emerson’s sense of double-consciousness was an experience of being bogged down by the realities of every day existence which denied him access to an experience of transcendence. For Du Bois, the realities of every day existence created his sense of double-consciousness, which was, although alienating, also an experience of seeing doubly, which provided what he called “the gift of second sight.” While Emerson’s double-consciousness emerged from a desire to disregard the materialities of everyday existence, Du Bois’s double-consciousness emerged from those very realities and from his sense of social responsibility as a black American. This important difference speaks directly to the experiences of literacy dramatized by the narratives in this study. Both Emerson and Du Bois address similar issues, questions about the individual’s relationship to the larger society in which he or she lives and the function of literacy in negotiating that relationship. The voices of Emerson and Du Bois, reaching out to each other across the sixty years spanned by this study thus add a historical and philosophical grounding to the dialectic between self-

reliance and social responsibility emerging from the literacy narratives themselves.

3. Barbara Welter defines the four cardinal virtues of the true woman in "The Cult of True Womanhood." For further reading on attitudes toward women writers in Victorian times see Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer* and Mary Kelley's *Private Woman, Public Stage*.

4. Throughout this dissertation I differentiate between Linda Brent, the *character* in the narrative itself and Harriet Jacobs, the actual historical figure and *author* of the text. When I discuss events that take place within the narrative itself, I refer to the character Linda Brent. When I talk about the process of writing the narrative and the historical circumstances surrounding its production, I refer to Harriet Jacobs.

5. Put another way, it is Isabel's failure to achieve a realistic sense of her responsibility to others which leads to her downfall. Because she is not a mother for most of the novel, because she does not take up the pen, Isabel never gains a clear sense of her relation to the realities of the world nor does she develop a sense of social responsibility which is the hallmark of literacy. Taken as a whole, these individual stories of literacy thus anticipate Du Bois's revision of Emersonian idealism by dramatizing experiences of double-voicedness or double-consciousness in the process of acquiring literacy. In this sense, the narratives themselves enact Du Bois's critique of Emersonian self-reliance by accounting for the way that gender and race complicate an individual's effort to understand his or her relationship to the larger American culture, complications inherent in the process of border crossing which is literacy, processes which Emerson's doctrine of idealism fails to acknowledge. The critiques of Emersonian self-reliance enacted by literacy narratives written by women and African-Americans during the period, and the troubling yet enabling experiences of double-consciousness they repeatedly dramatize, thus prefigure Du Bois's important revisions of Emersonian ideas in his own literacy narrative, *The Souls of Black Folk*.

## CHAPTER I

### “WRITING IN THE SPACES LEFT:” LITERACY AS A PROCESS OF BECOMING IN THE NARRATIVES OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS

Chapter VI of Frederick Douglass’s 1845 autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, opens with a scene of literacy instruction: the young Douglass is being taught to read by his mistress Sophia Auld, but he is interrupted by his master. Hugh Auld warns his wife that it is:

unlawful as well as unsafe to teach a slave to read . . . If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master--to do as he is told. Learning would *spoil* the best nigger in the world . . . it would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy. (274-5)

Auld’s vehement efforts to deny access to literacy provide Douglass with a profound insight as to literacy’s power in the eyes of his slavemaster.<sup>1</sup> This scene of instruction is cut short, but Douglass has seen enough to remark: “I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty--to wit, the white man’s power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement and I prized it highly. From that moment on, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom” (275).

Douglass’s comments here seem pretty straightforward. He appears to be arguing that in the *denial of literacy* lay the “white man’s power to enslave the black man”; that *literacy* was the “pathway from slavery to freedom.” Indeed, an entire tradition of scholarship has explored the link between literacy and freedom in the narrative of the slave. Henry Louis Gates Jr., has thoroughly documented the origins of this relationship between literacy and



freedom by showing that in the writings of “great” thinkers of the European Enlightenment--among them Kant, Hume, and Hegel--illiteracy was the basis for arguing that slaves were sub-human, since man’s capacity for reason (as reflected in literacy) was the ultimate means of differentiating him from the beasts. For slaves like Douglass, becoming literate was the most powerful way to prove they were human. In Gates’s words, literacy was not a skill, it “was a commodity [slaves] were forced to trade for their humanity” (*The Slave’s Narrative* xxviii).<sup>2</sup>

But while Douglass’s words seem to provide clear evidence of this tradition of linking literacy with freedom in slave narratives, it is important to remember that these are supposedly the thoughts of a *pre-literate* slave (as represented by a highly literate ex-slave). In other words, as a character within the narrative Douglass argues most forcefully for literacy as the pathway to freedom *before* he is actually literate; *before* he has any personal experience with reading and writing; *before* he has even acquired the skills. He is attracted to an abstract ideal of literacy before he has any familiarity with its actual practice.<sup>3</sup> Once he has acquired the skills and begins reading in the following chapter, Douglass’s attitude is pulled by contradictory impulses. He is no longer sure literacy leads to freedom but instead feels his ability to read is a “curse” as well as a “blessing.” In fact, when Douglass attempts to use his literacy to escape, by writing passes for himself and his friends, he is literally jailed, even further imprisoned by his belief that literacy alone can provide a pathway to freedom.

In this scene with Mrs. Auld, Douglass’s strong desire to learn to read and write arises out of the fact that literacy is denied to him by Auld (and by laws in some southern states against teaching slaves to read or write), *not*

because Douglass has any firsthand knowledge or experience of literacy's power to help him gain freedom at that point in the narrative. Douglass seems drawn to literacy because Auld's words indicate that it "would forever unfit him to be a slave," which is precisely what Douglass wants to be recognized as--a human being, unfit for slavery. Douglass understands that literacy can provide the power to re-define relationships of authority. He clearly states his desire to oppose his master Auld, from which emerges a desire for literacy:

What he most dreaded, that I most desired. What he most loved, that I most hated. That which to him was a great evil to be carefully shunned, was to me a great good, to be diligently sought; and the argument which he so warmly urged, against my learning to read, only served to inspire me with a desire to learn.  
(275)

Douglass's primary sense of literacy's benefits comes from Auld's assessment of its power.<sup>4</sup> In fact, Douglass claims that it was the vehemence with which Auld "impressed his wife with the evil consequences of giving me instruction that served to convince me that he was deeply sensible of the truths he was uttering. It gave me the best assurance that I might rely with the utmost confidence on the results which, he said, would flow from teaching me to read" (275). In this pre-literate stage, Douglass accepts an ideology of literacy put forth by Auld, one which rests upon the binary oppositions of slave/master, freedom/enslavement, human/subhuman, literate/illiterate. Aware that Auld uses literacy as a means to assert superiority over his slaves, Douglass plans himself to change his own position among these binary oppositions by using literacy to assert power over his master. He appears to take great pleasure in simultaneously agreeing with and subverting Auld's assessment of literacy's power when he explains to his readers, echoing the words of his master, that his "Mistress, in teaching me the alphabet, had given me the *inch*, and no

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passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intention; it is populated--overpopulated--with the intentions of others. Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one's own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process" (294). It is this process of increasing "literateness," of forcing literacy to submit to the intentions and experiences of the slave, that Douglass dramatizes throughout the narrative. Bakhtin describes this as an "ideological process of becoming," which is characterized by a sharp gap between Auld's "authoritative discourse" and Douglass's "internally persuasive discourse." Bakhtin describes internally persuasive discourse as language "that is denied all privilege, backed up by no authority at all and is frequently not even acknowledged in society . . . not even in the legal code" (342). Certainly this definition fits slave literacy--without privilege, denied by law, unacknowledged in society. For Bakhtin, "the struggle and dialogic interrelationship of these categories of ideological discourse are what usually determine the history of an individual ideological consciousness" (342). Likewise for Douglass, whose narrative dramatizes the process by which he reconfigures the authoritative discourse of the institution of slavery. In this "process of becoming," as I call it, Douglass begins by internalizing slavery's ideology of literacy, but he ultimately transforms that authoritative discourse with the internally persuasive voice of slave experience and African spirituality.

Once he learns to read, Douglass's conceptions of his own literacy become more complex, as evident in his paradoxical response to reading a dialogue between slave and master in "The Columbian Orator" which "resulted in the voluntary emancipation of the slave by his master" (279) and a speech by Sheridan about Catholic emancipation which was "a bold denunciation of slavery and a powerful vindication of human right" (278). Douglass explains

that this

reading enabled me to utter my thoughts, and to meet the arguments brought forward to sustain slavery, but while [it] relieved me of one difficulty, [it] brought on another more painful. The more I read, the more I was led to detest my enslavers . . . As I writhed under it, I would at times feel that *learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing* (emphasis added). It had given me a new view of my wretched condition, without the remedy. It had opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but to no ladder upon which to get out. In moments of agony, I envied my fellow slaves for their stupidity. The silver trump of freedom had roused my soul to eternal wakefulness. (279)

Houston Baker argues that “Douglass grasps language in a Promethean act of will, but leaves unexamined its potentially devastating effects”

(“Autobiographical Acts” 251). But Douglass’s words here do account for literacy’s many paradoxes, including its capacity to simultaneously empower and imprison, to “bless” and to “curse.” Ironically, at the very same moment that Douglass’s position in the “horrible pit” “enables” him to understand his enslaved condition, it gives no “remedy” to his pain. The experience of reading provides Douglass with the language to argue on an intellectual and moral basis against slavery, but those arguments are useless in freeing him from his own horrible reality. Even if he could present the arguments against slavery to master Auld, it would not change his identity as a slave. (What ultimately does change his reality as a slave, as I will argue below, is Douglass’s ability to redefine literacy by infusing the written word with the power of the spirit.) At this moment, Douglass realizes that ironically, literacy has only further enslaved him, has come to “torment [his] soul to unutterable anguish” (288) by providing him with terrifying knowledge of his condition but not physical freedom. His experience of reading fulfilled Auld’s promise that learning “would make [the slave] discontented and unhappy” (275). Douglass explains that once he learned to read “freedom now appeared to disappear no more forever.

It was heard in every sound, and seen in every thing. It was ever present to torment me with a sense of my wretched condition . . . I often found myself regretting my own existence, and wishing myself dead” (279).

Nearly paralyzed by this initial reading experience, Douglass is unsure about what literacy can offer the slave beyond a tormenting knowledge of freedom. His experience of reading both subverts and reinforces his sense of the freedom/enslavement dichotomy. But even though his experience with literacy is difficult, that doesn't interfere with the fact that Douglass still wants to read and to learn to write, nor with the fact that these desires are always connected with a search for freedom from bondage. Upon learning about abolition, Douglass focuses on his desire to escape to the North and believes that being able to write his own pass will lead him to freedom. His dramatization of learning to write, against the opposition of his master, shows Douglass developing an increasingly sophisticated understanding of literacy, which extends beyond Auld's binary oppositions. Chapter VII's boatyard scene, discussed below, which dramatizes Douglass's process of learning to read, reveals that literacy exists in many varying capacities in the rich interstices between and around freedom and enslavement, in marginal spaces free from such confining structures and ideologies. Douglass comes to understand a “heteroglossia” of literacy, which, in Bakhtin's words

enters a dialogically agitated and tension filled environment of alien words, value judgments and accents, weaves in and out of complex interrelationships, merges with some, recoils from others, intersects with yet a third group . . . brush[es] up against thousands of living dialogic threads woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in the social dialogue. (276)

Douglass's ability to survive in a slave system which rests on the many incompatible truths of slave and master prepares him to ultimately accept

literacy's paradoxes, to live and even thrive amid a "tension-filled environment" full of a seemingly endless multiplicity of truths about literacy co-existing.

It is this multiplicity of shifting possibilities for literateness which seems unacknowledged in our histories and theories of the subject. Much that has been written about literacy and its role in the slave narrative seems intent on arguing in the terms of Auld's binary oppositions, claiming that literacy either does or doesn't represent freedom. Scholars qualify literacy discussions to a particular time and place, since the meaning and ideology of literacy shift among cultures. But Frederick Douglass's narrative tells us that for the slave, so many opposing ideologies and cultures of literacy existed simultaneously in antebellum America, that it is impossible to permanently sort them out in any meaningful way. At the very moment one makes the claim that literacy leads to freedom for the slave, evidence of literacy's role in the further enslavement of blacks becomes obvious, as Douglass's experiences repeatedly show us. Douglass's response to this multiplicity of meanings is to constantly shift his perspective on literacy, to melt into the heteroglossia, to maneuver his point of view both inside and "outside the circle" of southern culture, and to literally and metaphorically acquire his literacy from a hidden position in the margins where he takes advantage of literacy's paradoxical potentials. Douglass's most important insight is that the binary oppositions of literacy set up by the culture of slavery are both true and false simultaneously; he then sets out to take advantage of that insight.

Douglass refers to two important moments of liminality in the narrative, that of being "outside the circle" of the slave songs and of writing "in the spaces left" of his young master's copying book. These liminal points, one of reading or interpretation and one of writing, serve as spatial metaphors for the fluidity of Douglass's process of defining and/or transcending the meaning of literacy in

slave culture.<sup>6</sup> Chapter VII details the drama of learning to write, a drama involving literal and metaphorical levels of accommodation, subterfuge, antagonism, direct imitation, and ultimately self-insertion in the margins of the “authoritative discourse” of a southern ideology of literacy. Douglass moves quite fluidly among these different postures, each of which embraces an alternative discourse of literacy.

In a rather deconstructive insight, Frederick Douglass sees that whenever literacy is used for a particular purpose by whites, there is at that very same moment a whole host of “spaces left” for literacy to be also performing other functions. Increasingly aware of those spaces, Douglass manages to exploit their rich potential. Whites using literacy for one purpose are at that very moment ignoring all sorts of other possibilities. As illustrated in the discussion that follows, Douglass uses this knowledge to his advantage by constantly practicing a kind of sleight of hand (or trickery) reminiscent of African trickster tales. For example, he takes letters used by whites for solely utilitarian purpose (to identify pieces of wood in a boatyard) and transforms that use of literacy into a sophisticated political act.<sup>7</sup> Douglass knows that literacy is a technology by which one group asserts control or status over another, so he exploits that capacity of literacy when antagonizing white boys, who only see in his taunts a way to use literacy to show their superiority over Douglass. As I will show, the white boys are incapable at that moment of seeing into “the spaces left,” which is why Douglass is successful in learning from them. He turns moments of literacy’s potential oppression into moments of control and self-education; “in the spaces left” by the white boys’ efforts to prove their superiority is the unseen opportunity for Douglass to learn to write. In this more sophisticated stage of his literacy education, Douglass constantly



shifts the meanings of the literacy situation, setting up for his white enslavers one use of literacy and working in the margins for his own benefits. The scenes dramatizing Douglass's learning to write in Chapter VII are interstitial representations of literacy which shift according to the circumstances.

Significantly, Douglass's scenes of literacy acquisition also occur on geographical borderlands, between north and south, between land and sea, in the port of Baltimore. "The idea as to how I might learn to write," he says, "was suggested to me by being in Durgin and Bailey's shipyard" (280). Moreover, the ships represent hope and possibility for Douglass because they provide a potential means of escape from the South, yet ships were also used to facilitate the slave trade. In addition, the shipyard is the place Douglass later returns to in the narrative when he works as a caulker, calling it his "school." This parallel acquisition of literacy and the learning of a marketable skill in the boatyard also implies a correlation between literacy and economic empowerment for Douglass. Douglass is by no means free from slavery in the boatyard, but he is separated from the relative oppression of southern plantation culture and he does earn an income while working among "many . . . black carpenters [who] were freemen" (312). He explains his manner of learning to write as follows:

[T]he ship carpenters, after hewing, and getting a piece of timber ready for use, write on the timber the name of that part of the ship for which it was intended. When a piece of timber was intended for the starboard side, it would be marked thus-- "S." A piece for the larboard side forward, would be marked thus-- "L.F." When a piece was for starboard side forward, it would be marked thus-- "S.F." For larboard aft, it would be marked thus--"L.A." For starboard aft, it would be marked thus-- "S.A." I soon learned the names of these letters and for what they were intended when placed on a piece of timber in the shipyard. I immediately commenced copying them, and in a short time, was able to make the four letters named. (280-1)

On the body of ships which both represent freedom and facilitate slavery, literacy is used by shipbuilders for a purely utilitarian purpose, to identify ship parts. But Frederick Douglass sees “in the spaces” left by this functional use of literacy, the opportunity to transform the shipyard into a scene of self-education and an act of political resistance. The white men are unaware of the way that Douglass, who has been denied access to letters, reconfigures this experience of literacy for his own benefit while simultaneously pretending to blithely accept literacy’s benign utilitarian capacity.

In the second stage of this scene of learning to write, Douglass takes advantage of the antagonism whites feel for him as a slave. He understands the way that literacy, as a form of knowledge, signals a kind of mental superiority for whites over illiterate blacks. He exploits the implications of this superiority by turning literacy into a competition designed to feed the ego of “any white boy who [he] knew could write” (281). Douglass explains:

I would tell [the white boy] I could write as well as he. The next word would be, “I don’t believe you. Let me see you try it.” I would then make the letters which I had been so fortunate as to learn, and ask him to beat that. In this way I got a good many lessons in writing, which it is quite possible I should never have gotten in any other way. (281)

What masquerades as a literacy *competition* is actually a *lesson* in literacy, with the white boy entirely unaware of his capacity as teacher. Douglass is successful because he has the ability to simultaneously identify white control of literacy as oppressive and to use that very desire for control as the white boy’s Achilles’ heel. He subverts the ethic of competition essential to the prevailing ideology of white manhood and to the growth of capitalism. This activity is akin to stealing, but really Douglass does not “steal” his knowledge of letters from his white teachers; they are just unaware of the value of what they freely give to him. He is handed an education by those who, at that

moment, see literacy only in a narrow framework of competition--entirely unrelated to the passing on of knowledge.

All of these scenes of literacy acquisition are performed outside of the Auld household, in the open air free from the institutional space of slavery and the white accouterments of literacy. "During this time, my copy-book was the board fence, brick wall, and pavement; my pen and ink was a lump of chalk. With these, I mainly learned how to write" (281). Douglass thus emerges as a literate individual in the marginal spaces between the world sanctioned by slavery and an alternative space of his own making free from its oppressive limitations. His moments of literacy in the boatyard and in the neighborhood are physically free from the hierarchy of slavery inside the Auld household (where he was initially admonished from acquiring literacy) and, because always shifting into the "spaces left," also metaphorically free from the slaveholder's particular ideology of literacy. These scenes capture what Bakhtin calls a "double-voicedness" in that Douglass simultaneously acknowledges both the "authoritative discourse" of the institution of slavery and his own "internally persuasive discourse" about literacy.<sup>8</sup> Douglass achieves the ability to write in a state of fluidity, of acknowledged heteroglossia, always maneuvering to fit himself into "the spaces left" by his white enslavers.

An essential part of this process of learning to write is the act of copying. As Douglass explains:

I then commenced and continued copying the Italics in Webster's Spelling Book, until I would make them all without looking at the book. By this time, my little Master Thomas had gone to school and learned how to write, and had written over a number of copying books. These had been brought home, and shown to some of our near neighbors, and then laid aside. My mistress used to go to class meeting at Wilk Street meeting-house every Monday afternoon, and leave me to take care of the house. When

left thus, I used to spend the time in *writing in the spaces left* in master Thomas's copy-book, copying what he had written. I continued to do this until I could write in a hand very similar to Master Thomas. Thus, after a long, tedious effort for years, I finally succeeded in learning how to write. (281)

In many ways, Douglass's acquisition of literacy is a series of acts of resistance, because his master and the southern legal code specifically say he shouldn't be taught to read or write. But at the same time that Douglass opposes Auld, he is also copying his young master's hand, imitating his style, writing "in a hand very similar to master Thomas." Douglass's handwriting, the unique mark of literacy, always bears the trace of his unwitting teachers and enslavers.

Douglass's ephemeral acts of writing on the wall with chalk call forth the image of Christ writing in the sand in the gospel of St. John. In this story Christ revises the written law which condemns the woman adulterer, challenging those among her without sin to throw the first stone. In doing so, Christ privileges the spirit of the law over the written word of the law, and he does so by writing with his finger in the dust, the authority of which is as ephemeral as the spoken word. Christ explains that "the written word kills but the spirit gives life (2 Corinthians, 3.1-6).

It is precisely this ability to differentiate between the spirit and the word, between literacy and orality, which guides Frederick Douglass to his most effective means of coming to ideological consciousness and of transcending the experience of slavery. The first step in this experience of relative freedom involves Douglass's repeated critique of the limitations of Christian literacy which illustrates a kind of "second sight" that allows him to step outside the bounds of slave culture to critique literacy as a system of representation by showing how thoroughly literacy has been corrupted by slavery's perpetuation

of a “system of fraud” (301). A constant strain throughout the narrative reminds the reader that slavery corrupts language to such an extent that it frequently has little representative capacity or any connection to truth or reality. Words have lost their power in a culture which allows hypocritical slavemasters to manipulate language to justify acts of oppression.

A specific case of slavery’s corruption of language is religious literacy. Particularly in his Appendix, Douglass argues that religious doctrine uses the text of the Bible as a means of hiding reality, of misrepresenting truth. Religion, particularly the text of Scripture, “is a mere covering for the most horrid crimes,—a justifier of the most appalling barbarity,—a sanctifier of the most hateful frauds,—and a dark shelter under, which the darkest, foulest, grossest, and most infernal deeds of slaveholders find the strongest protection” (301). Calling the south a land of Christianity is, for Douglass, “the climax of all misnomers, the boldest of all frauds, and the grossest of all libels, . . . I am filled with unutterable loathing when I contemplate the religious pomp and show, together with the horrible inconsistencies, which every where surround me” (326).<sup>9</sup> Douglass can offer this critique because his own “literateness” has matured to the point where he can step “outside the circle” of southern religious culture in order to “read” it truthfully and comment on its failings.<sup>10</sup>

The section of the narrative which tells the story of Douglass’s captivity on Mr. Covey’s farm epitomizes all that is wrong with slavery and the means by which orality can provide some measure of freedom from an oppressive reality in a way that literacy has failed to do up until this point. Covey, to whom Douglass is sent to be “broken in,” has a reputation of extreme hypocrisy: he is “a professor of religion—a pious soul a member and a class leader in the Methodist church” (289) and a most savage master. “Mr. Covey’s

forte consisted in his power to deceive. His life was devoted to planning and perpetrating the grossest deception. Everything he possessed in the shape of learning of religion, he made conform to his disposition to deceive" (292). Covey is thus the human embodiment of hypocrisy, the master of slavery's capacity for misrepresentation and fraud.

While in Covey's possession, when "made to drink the bitterest dregs of slavery" (293), Douglass describes himself as *least* human and *most* human; in the confines of one chapter he changes from being a "brute" to a "man," transcending from the lowest moments of his enslavement to the highest. Douglass claims of his time on Covey's plantation: "My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man was transformed into a brute" (293). When Douglass equates his humanity with, among other things, his desire to read, he seems to reinforce the literacy-humanity connection explored earlier by Henry Louis Gates, which equated a lack of "intellect" with sub-human status. But while in Covey's possession Douglass reasserts his humanity through two experiences which draw on an oral and spiritual tradition. In the first, Douglass spends a Sunday on the shore of the Chesapeake Bay watching the sailboats and speaks out loud *to no one but himself and God*: "[T]here, with no audience but the Almighty, I would pour out my soul's complaint, in my rude way, with an apostrophe to the moving multitude of ships" (293). Douglass expresses his utmost grief to the open sea, an oral truth which seems to allow him to transcend his pain and realize that "[t]here is a better day coming" (294).<sup>11</sup> This empowering experience of spirituality prepares Douglass for the following scene, when he becomes immune to Covey's inhuman treatment. Douglass

describes this as the time when “the slave was made a man” (294).

After fleeing from a particularly horrible beating by Covey, Douglass is given by his friend Sandy Jenkins, “a certain *root*, which if I should take some of it with me, carrying it *always on my right side*, would render it impossible for Mr. Covey, or any other white man to whip me” (297). Douglass’s belief in the power of the root seems to represent his acknowledgement of African folklore, which, like his apostrophe to the sea, brings him closer to a sense of freedom and humanity than he has ever had as a slave. It empowers him to act, to fight back against Covey in an epic battle:

This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood . . . and inspired within me a determination to be free. He can only understand the deep satisfaction I experienced, who has himself repelled by force the bloody arm of slavery. I felt as I never felt before. It was a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom . . . and I now resolved that, however long I remained a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact. (298-299)

In a comparison to Christ’s resurrection from the dead, Douglass achieves from the root a kind of spiritual transcendence. Moreover, his ability to separate the *fact* from the *name* of slavery illustrates his power to disregard the name given to him by the institution of slavery and to define himself. He relies on his own internal sense of reality to name his world, which critic Lucinda H. MacKethan reminds us is a metaphor for the state of being free and of “having control . . . over his own identity” (66). He gains this strength from a belief in the African “root” of his identity as opposed to accepting the definition of his white enslaver. In this, he acknowledges what Dolan Hubbard calls a “doubly rich heritage . . . [by converting] a tension between black oral tradition and Judeo-Christian texts of moral absolutes” into a new mode of

action (19). In this syncretic moment lies his ultimate experience of freedom. As Gayl Jones writes, “to liberate their voices from the often tyrannic frame of another’s outlook, many world literatures look to their own folklores, and oral modes for forms, themes, tastes, conceptions of symmetry, time spaces, detail and human values” (192). Douglass is most liberated from Covey’s tyranny when he can metaphorically acknowledge the “root” of his African identity, which combines with his faith in a Western Christian tradition to give him strength.<sup>12</sup>

Despite all its associations with freedom, literacy alone doesn’t lead to the turning point in Douglass’s identity, nor does it provide him the means to assert his own reality and his own humanity. But Douglass’s narrative does act to reevaluate the power and function of orality in his life as a slave as the root episode illustrates. Moreover, Douglass’s discussion of the songs of slavery early in the narrative anticipates the power of orality to transcend the pain of oppression and to truthfully convey the human condition of slavery, “revealing at once the highest joy and the deepest sadness” (262). Upon hearing the sounds of slave songs, Douglass reinforces the ability of orality to capture the deepest emotions and the reality of experience when he claims that “I have sometimes thought that the mere *hearing* of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the *reading* of whole volumes of philosophy could do . . . Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains” (263). Even as he himself writes a “testimony against slavery,” Douglass acknowledges the strengths and limitations of both the written word and the power of song, and he seeks to combine them. Simply remembering the sounds of these songs infuses Douglass’s writing with an eloquence unmatched in the



narrative:

To those songs I trace my first glimmering conception of the dehumanizing character of slavery. I can never get rid of that conception. These songs still follow me, to deepen my hatred of slavery, and quicken my sympathies for my brethren in bonds. If anyone wishes to be impressed with the soul-killing effects of slavery, let him go to Colonel Lloyd's plantation, and, on allowance-day, place himself in the deep pine woods, and there let him, in silence, analyze the sounds that shall pass through the chambers of his soul, --and if he is not impressed, it will be because there is no flesh in his obdurate heart. (262)

In interpreting the meaning of these songs, Douglass uses the spatial metaphor of being "within the circle" of slavery, which he differentiates from the experience of listening to the slave songs outside the circle of slave culture: "I did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incomprehensible songs. I was myself within the circle; so that I neither saw nor heard as those without might see or hear" (263). The songs of slavery are misinterpreted by those "inside the circle" of slavery; uninformed whites hear them as representations of contentment, thereby justifying the system of slavery. It is only in the liminal space, outside the circle of slavery, with a sophisticated critical literacy, a "second sight," that a true interpretation is possible.<sup>13</sup> The songs are the slave's own language, to which their white enslavers are illiterate, but Douglass needs the distance afforded by his escape from slavery to understand this complexity.

Douglass seems to hint of song as a proprietary language when he describes Covey's attempt to sing. "A very poor singer," Covey relies on Douglass's help to carry a tune, which Douglass sometimes denied him. "My non-compliance would almost always produce great confusion. To show himself independent of me, [Covey] would start and stagger through his hymn in the most discordant manner" (293). Douglass's refusal to sing for Covey is

reminiscent of Auld's denial of literacy instruction to Douglass in Chapter VI; Covey is "illiterate" when it comes to song, and Douglass uses that as a means to assert his own superiority.

Douglass's use of the food metaphor to describe his appetite for reading captures the many complexities of the relationship between slave literacy and orality/aurality. He refers to literacy as food when he trades bread for the lessons he receives from the neighborhood children: "I used to carry bread with me . . . [which] I used to bestow upon these hungry little urchins, who in return, would give me the more valuable bread of knowledge" (278). In this, and several other instances in the narrative, literacy, like food, gives Douglass sustenance. He craves any kind of written document. For example, he describes the abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator* as "my food and my drink" (325).

But food and literacy were also frequently denied to slaves in an effort to keep them docile. Unable to read, slaves had their "minds starved by their cruel masters" (304). And to use Douglass's food metaphor, being literate and in bondage was much like being outside the food house at his master's in Baltimore. "A great many times have we poor creatures been nearly perishing with hunger, when food in abundance lay smoldering in the safe and smoke-house" (286). It was also like the experience of hungry slaves outside the finely cultivated garden on Colonel Lloyd's plantation. Tempted by boundless fruits of almost every description, slaves were not allowed to partake of the garden's sustenance; likewise for a literate slave without freedom. Douglass's sense of being overwhelmed by his reading of *The Columbian Orator* is similar to the experience of the slave who was forced to eat molasses "until the poor fellow [was] made sick at the mention of it" or the slave who is given more food than he can possibly eat and is compelled by his master "to eat it within a given

time” (301). Such treatment was designed to “carry off the rebellious spirit” of the slaves by “disgust[ing] them with freedom” and making them feel that returning to slavery was in fact relative freedom. Douglass expresses this same sentiment about literacy when he claims, after learning to read, that “in moments of agony, I envied my fellow slaves for their stupidity” (279).

As if to illustrate the way that literacy could exacerbate his sense of enslavement, Douglass tells of his failed attempt to escape by forging passes for himself and his friends. In this incident, Douglass’s literacy has the potential to lead him to freedom but only ends up imprisoning him further. Even before Douglass and his friends get the chance to try to use the forged passes, their plan is discovered. While being brought in for questioning by their masters, Douglass tells his friend Henry to eat the forged pass with his biscuit, lest it be discovered as evidence of their plan. Here, the metaphoric value of literacy as food is subverted, because the literal eating of the pass, the words, is not sustaining but is an acknowledgement of literacy’s failure to lead to freedom. At the same time, acts of orality (the rumor Douglass hears) and auralness (the eating of the pass) ensure the men’s survival. Moreover, in this instance literacy not only failed to help the men escape, it further imprisoned them and separated Douglass from those friends he loved the most. This punishment also reinforces the power of literacy in the eyes of the master, in that the literate act is the crime for which the punishment is the most severe. At this moment of failed literacy, from his jail cell, Douglass echoes the sentiments felt when he first learned to read: “Covered with gloom, I sunk down to the utmost despair” (311).

Ironically, Douglass’s actual escape to freedom in the north is unwritten; it is disconnected from any literate acts. In a move which illustrates literacy’s potential to cause harm to good people and the protective power of

communicating orally, Douglass consciously remains silent about the particulars of his eventual escape. “I deem it proper to make known my intention not to state all the facts connected with the transaction . . . [since] such a statement would undoubtedly produce greater vigilance on the part of slaveholders than has existed among them; which would, of course, be the means of guarding a door whereby some dear brother might escape his galling chains” (315). Douglass uses the master’s tool of ignorance as a weapon of against him. “I would keep the merciless slaveholder profoundly ignorant of the means of flight adopted by the slave . . . Let him be left to feel his way in the dark; let darkness commensurate with his crime hover over him” (316). Critic Dana Nelson Salvino claims that this characterization of the white slaveholder shrouded in darkness depicts him as illiterate, a “victim to a system of knowledge from which he is barred. Douglass’s description of the unknowing slaveholder captures the very experience of illiteracy in a literate society, one of fear and powerlessness” (151). The decision not to write about his escape indicates that Douglass has moved beyond the idealization of literacy which characterized his pre-literate stage. Here, he succeeds in subverting the opposition between slave and master by putting the white man in the position of being illiterate. But Douglass also acknowledges that literacy and freedom are not necessarily inextricably linked.

Ultimately, Douglass’s experiences of literacy within the narrative do not afford him with even a semblance of the freedom he experiences in these scenes of orality/aurality. Of course, the scenes depict a more spiritual than physical freedom, but from the way that Douglass talks about his experiences, such transcendence is still empowering for the slave. As Douglass later says in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, “slaves sing more to *make* themselves happy than to express their happiness” (100), indicating that the process of singing

the songs has the capacity to change the slave's reality. Perhaps the reason for the empowerment experienced by Douglass in all these scenes is that the scenes share one important thing: in their efforts at self-representation and self-expression, the black speakers are relatively independent of any white audience. The songs, Douglass's words to the sea, even the root folktale, are moments of ideological consciousness "outside the circle" of white oppression, spiritual in their strength because they allow the slave to transcend momentarily an oppressive reality, reminiscent of Homer's standard epithet, "winged words" which, as Walter Ong explains, "suggests evanescence, power and freedom: [oral] words are constantly moving, but by flight, which is a powerful form of movement, lifting the flier free of the ordinary, gross, heavy 'objective' world" (77). As Gayl Jones reminds us, "musicians use a collection of sounds to communicate to one another things that language cannot adequately convey . . . feelings and realities; they can more easily create possibilities and transcend audience controversies over definitions of African American reality" (190). It is precisely this quality of orality to which Douglass's story attests; these are experiential moments not committed to space in the way that literacy commits words to a physical space and thus introduces a sense of private ownership and responsibility for words. For the slave, who is denied control of physical space and who is himself a piece of property, the elusive quality of orality, the fact that it does not leave a trace, makes this mode of expression more liberating.

The repeated failure of the communicative act between black speakers and their white audiences is evident in scenes scattered throughout the narrative where slaves' efforts to speak their own truths are repeatedly denied or in scenes where slaves are forced to lie or to remain silent according to the demands of their white audience. When two slaves on Colonel Lloyd's

plantation, old and young Barney, were unjustly accused by Lloyd of not giving proper attention to the horses in their charge, they were not afforded any opportunity to reply to the accusations: "To all these unjust complaints, no matter how unjust, the slave must never answer a word. . . When [Colonel Lloyd] spoke, a slave must stand, listen and tremble" (264). Slaves learned that even when they were allowed to speak, they dare not utter the truth, since Colonel Lloyd might trick them into expressing how they felt about their enslavement, and then sell them to a Georgia trader for doing so. Slaves learned to lie in order to protect themselves, leading them to establish "the maxim that a still tongue makes a wise head" (266). Coerced into using language to hide reality in order to protect themselves in the presence of a white audience, slaves forsook language and found their true humanity in moments of spirituality independent of whites.<sup>14</sup>

In the Afterword to *From Behind the Veil*, his study of Afro-American narrative, Robert B. Stepto reinforces Douglass's assessment of literacy, when he writes that "Afro-American literature has developed as much because of the culture's distrust of literacy as because of his abiding faith in it" (196). Stepto discusses in detail Douglass's identity as a writer and traces the impetus for the writing (and rewriting) of his autobiography to his relationship with a distrustful white readership, using the paradigm of storytelling. Stepto's argument refers to Douglass's relationship with a white readership as a published *author*, but his comments are also helpful in understanding Douglass's critique of literacy as a *character* within the narrative struggling with individual acts of communication in the face of hostile white masters. Stepto explains that "[i]n Afro-American storytelling texts especially, rhetoric and narrative strategy combine time and time again to declare that the

principal unreliable factor in the storytelling paradigm is the reader . . . and that acts of creative communication are fully initiated . . . when the reader gets ‘told’--or ‘told off’--in such a way that he or she finally begins to hear. It is in this way that most written tales express their distrust, not just of readers, but of the official literate culture in general” (202-3). Douglass’s narrative fits Stepto’s definition of the Afro-American storytelling text in that, as I have outlined, it expresses its distrust of the ‘official’ southern literate culture, particularly the religious literate culture. There are countless scenes in this narrative, several of which I have mentioned, which illustrate the failure of the communicative act, both written and oral, between the black speaker and his white audience. Douglass’s response to this failure as a slave in bondage--in the scenes which illustrate his strongest sense of freedom--is to ignore his white audience, to speak instead to himself and to God, which, in Bakhtin’s way of understanding it is the means by which Douglass “populates [his language] with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention” (222). Ultimately, Douglass identifies moments of reclaiming his humanity not in literacy alone--which was dominated by the rules and intentions of the white audience--but with literate experiences transformed by action and infused with the spirit of an African oral tradition.

Thus far I have limited my discussion to quite a narrow framework, focusing only on Frederick Douglass’s experiences of literacy and orality as a character within his 1845 narrative. I now want to widen my scope beyond Douglass’s life as a slave to explore the meaning and function of literacy in Douglass’s experiences as a published author and a renowned orator in the years after his escape from slavery. I argued earlier that as Douglass’s

literateness becomes increasingly sophisticated he manages to transcend the limitations of slave literacy by constantly shifting his perspective and by engaging in acts of literate expression transformed by action and infused with the spirit of orality. These moments of relative freedom frequently occur “outside the circle” of a white audience. But once he becomes a spokesman for the abolitionist movement and a published author and journalist in a racist northern society, Frederick Douglass no longer has the option of transcending a white audience because whites are the very audience he needs to persuade of slavery’s horrible injustices. Instead, as the revisions to his narrative illustrate, Douglass continues to synthesize the black oral tradition with his developing literateness. It is in the syncretization of these two systems of representation, which Douglass repeatedly refers to as his “two-pronged instrument,” his own unique version of Bakhtin’s “double-voiced discourse,” that he gains his utmost personal power and cultural authority.

As a public speaker and a published writer, Douglass’s experience of literacy changes dramatically. He is forced to negotiate his way through a whole host of new concerns, mostly having to do with his relationship to his audience. Houston Baker reminds us that Douglass’s 1845 narrative was initially written in response to distrustful whites who doubted the veracity of incidents Douglass narrated in his speeches at abolitionist meetings. The “work was written to prove that the narrator had indeed been a slave” (“Acts” 251). At the same time, in writing the narrative (as in any autobiographical act) Douglass is asserting his identity as a human being and defining himself as a man, not a slave, a very personal and potentially liberating act. Given these two impetuses for his public act of writing, Douglass’s experiences of authorship were alternately freeing and enslaving because they



simultaneously asserted his humanity and reinforced his identity as a slave.

In addition, as Douglass's literacy becomes a public act, the rhetorical triangle of his literate activity (writer-reader-text) broadens to include the added political dimensions of his *sponsors*, the Garrisonian abolitionists, and his *constituency*, the millions of blacks both free and enslaved, on whose behalf he writes. The continuing development of Douglass's literateness, evident in emerging conflicts between him and his sponsor William Lloyd Garrison, from whom he breaks in the 1850's, and Douglass and his constituency (many of whom criticized Douglass for "deserting to the old master class and being a traitor to his race" (*Life* 436)) are embodied in the various versions of the narrative which Douglass revised throughout his life. In the rest of this chapter I will explore the changing meaning and function of literacy in these texts, and acknowledge the process of revision and the role of orality in Douglass's developing consciousness of literacy. I will explore Douglass's shifting definitions of literacy: his understanding of literacy as a system of self-representation (as an autobiographical act) and as an avenue for political representation as he attempts to *speak and write* for an oppressed people without alienating his white readership. Douglass always occupies a marginal position between a privileged, highly literate white ruling class *to whom he writes* and a largely illiterate class of blacks *for whom he writes*.<sup>15</sup> This shifting position is evident in Douglass's changing self-definition as reflected in the revisions of his narrative.<sup>16</sup>

Many scholars have argued that the form of the slave narrative is enslaved because of its inextricable link to a white audience and the racist assumptions of those to whom arguments against slavery are being directed. Robert Stepto, for example, points to the existence of "authenticating

documents” appended to the beginning of slave narratives by prominent whites. He argues that these documents are “at least partially responsible for the narrative’s acceptance as historical evidence” (3). These documents attest to the veracity of the narrative, evidence that even the literate slave narrator had little authority without being backed up by the voice of whites who swear the story is indeed the truth. These documents are (to get back to Bakhtin) the “authoritative discourse” of the abolitionist movement. William Andrews argues that all nineteenth-century slave narratives are “enclosed” by the literary forms bequeathed to them by whites. “Formally (at least) the framework relegates the narrator’s words to the status of middle . . . thus creating the impression that the narrative proper is a ‘means’ serving its white audience’s ‘ends’” (“Strategies” 25). Douglass’s narrative is preceded by a preface from abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison and a letter from lawyer Wendell Phillips. Both Phillips and Garrison assure the readers that “[t]he testimony of Mr. DOUGLASS . . . is sustained by a cloud of witnesses, whose veracity is unimpeachable” (*Narrative* 251). The narrative, says Garrison, “is essentially true in all its statements; nothing has been set down in malice, nothing exaggerated, nothing drawn from the imagination” (247).

Ironically, Garrison argues most forcefully for the authenticity of Douglass’s written narrative by citing the pathos and stirring eloquence of Douglass’s first speech in Nantucket in August 1841. “As a public speaker he excels in pathos, wit, imitation, strength of reasoning, and fluency of language” (247). Furthermore, Garrison says that Douglass was “capable of high attainments as an intellectual and moral being” (246)--the very qualities which define humanity--even though “he was only a piece of property, a beast of burden, a chattel” (246). Here Garrison refers to Douglass’s *orality* to validate his *literacy*; he equates intellectual capacity with humanity to argue for

Douglass's believability. Garrison also points to Douglass's soliloquy on the shore of the Chesapeake--discussed earlier as one of Douglass's most transcendent moments--as the most eloquent moment in the narrative: "I think the most thrilling [incident] is the description DOUGLASS gives of his feelings, as he stood soliloquizing respecting his fate, and the chances of his one day being a freeman, on the banks of the Chesapeake Bay--viewing the receding vessels as they flew with their white wings before the breeze, and apostrophizing them as animated by the living spirit of freedom. Who can read that passage, and be insensible to its pathos and sublimity?" (249). Douglass wrote in order to authenticate his speech, but Garrison's statement authenticates the written narrative by attesting to Douglass's power as an orator, thus attesting to the "internally persuasive" power of Douglass's preacherly voice.

Houston Baker argues that Douglass's act of writing is further dictated by the language, discourse and expectations of the white readership. He claims Douglass's style is "indistinguishable from that of the sentimental-romantic oratory that marked the American nineteenth century" and that Douglass is forced to create a version of himself that is "molded by the values of white America" ("Autobiographical" 251). Baker questions whether or not the "self" described in Douglass's narrative is 'authentic' because "once literacy has been achieved, the black self . . . begins to distance itself from the aural-oral community of the slave quarters. . . . The voice of the unwritten self, once it is subjected to the linguistic codes, literary conventions, and expectations of a white audience, is perhaps never again the authentic black voice of American slavery. It is, rather, the voice of a self transformed by an autobiographical act into a sharer in the general public discourse about slavery." In essence, Baker believes that Douglass, in using literacy, imprisons himself within the

confines of an already established public discourse about slavery. Baker believes that had “there been a separate written black language available, Douglass might have fared better” (251) in terms of making his literacy an act of freedom. Annette Niemtow agrees, claiming that Douglass’s autobiography, “by virtue of its genre, unconsciously pays tribute to a definition of self created by whites. . . . the act of writing itself . . . helps him to [a] self . . . defined by whites . . . for the word itself posits a concept controlled by whites” (102).

Henry Louis Gates extends this argument further, claiming that language itself is enslaving for all black writers. Gates explains that by playing into the false premise “of the great white Western tradition” that argued writing would bring freedom (from bondage, from racism), blacks accepted a challenge which concealed a trap. This trap is symbolized in the story Gates tells of the 1915 death of Edmond LaForest, a prominent member of the Haitian literary movement *LaRonde*. LaForest tied a dictionary around his neck and jumped from a bridge to his death, symbolizing the “curious relation of the marginalized writer to the act of writing in a modern language” (*Race* 13). LaForest’s death captures the indentured relationship of the black writer to modern languages since blacks have not been liberated from racism by their writings (12). It is the challenge of the black writer, argues Gates, to “critique this relation of indenture” which is precisely what Douglass does.

Certainly Frederick Douglass’s entrance into an already existing discourse about slavery is initially limiting in some respects, but language is not always the “prison house” which critic Wilson J. Moses characterizes it as being for Douglass (70). Instead, language and the genre of the slave narrative serve more as a template for Douglass’s acts of writing, which he draws upon as a model, but which he increasingly moves away from as he rewrites and

revises the text. There *are* indications that once Douglass was physically free he did remain enslaved by the language of slavery. For example, when he calls his fellows slaves “stupid” for being unable to read, he echoes the correlation that Henry Louis Gates reminds us was originally made by Immanuel Kant, who equated ‘black’ with ‘stupid.’ Even after his escape from slavery, Douglass refers to his state of freedom as being his own master. By calling himself his “own master” Douglass identifies himself in the language of the master-slave relationship, even though he has escaped its bonds.

Although I acknowledge the arguments that Douglass is confined by language and the demands of his white audience, Gates and especially Baker and Niemtzw present an oversimplified view of Douglass’s relationship to literacy. They represent literacy as a static relationship of bondage and represent the black self as defined by language. To reiterate the claim made earlier, Douglass’s literacy is a *process* by which he comes to terms with the authoritative discourse of the institution of slavery, a *process* in which he infuses that discourse with the internally persuasive voice of slave experience. Douglass’s acts of authorship show us that his sense of self is a fluid one which emerges through his struggles with literacy as a means of self- and political-representation. This fluidity is in opposition to Baker’s assessment of the authentic black self. Douglass’s relationship to the form of the slave narrative and to the discourse of slavery constantly shifts throughout his career, moving beyond being defined by that discourse, to rewriting it, indeed, even rewriting the discourse of history.<sup>17</sup>

At certain moments, admittedly, Douglass was enslaved by literacy. In the 1845 version of the narrative in the early period of his public life, Douglass was relatively dependent upon the validation of the abolitionists and was

limited by the “authoritative discourse” of the abolition movement. The Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society paid his salary and ensured that his narrative was published. But if we move beyond the 1845 narrative to explore its revisions and if we look at Douglass’s changing role in public life, we see a writer who gradually matured in his public literacy and moved away from what Baker and Gates would characterize as literary bondage to an increasingly critical literacy which he used for political advantage. In the process, Douglass’s writing became less dependent upon the authentication of whites and ultimately critiqued the relation of indenture Gates describes. Moreover, by the time he completed his final revisions of the autobiography in the 1880’s, slavery had been abolished and Douglass’s writings moved beyond the slave narrative form to address the complexity of race relations and the American political consciousness during Reconstruction. By constantly revising his own acts of self-representation and political representation, Douglass eluded the enslaving capacity of literacy for the black writer in much the same way that he wrested control of literacy from the white boys in Durgin and Bailey’s shipyard.

This developing sense of self is evident in the changing titles of the narrative, which correspond with the phases of Douglass’s public career. From 1841-1845, Douglass was a paid lecturer for the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. The 1845 narrative, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, represents a self defined by slavery. By 1855, Douglass’s life has moved beyond his identity as a slave, as evident in the title *My Bondage and My Freedom*, which indicates a shared emphasis on Douglass identity as a slave and his identity as a free man as well as a shift from object to subject as indicated by the shift from third to first person. In the 1881 narrative, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, his early life as a slave, his escape from bondage,*

*and his history complete*, Douglass's life is important, but also important are the "times" in which he lived, indicating that the text moves beyond autobiography into accounts of history. Indeed, Douglass claims that "I have written out my experiences here, not to exhibit my wounds and bruises to awaken and attract sympathy to myself personally, but as part of the history of a profoundly interesting period in American life and progress" (486).

Douglass's autobiographical writing is a constant process of redefining and accommodating his multiple selves; the act of revision allows him to acknowledge that fluid process of self-definition and the means by which it merges into political and historical representation.

Initially Douglass accommodates his acts of literacy to meet the demands of his abolitionist supporters and to win the acceptance of a distrustful audience of whites. In describing his life as a slave, he uses textual metaphors to capture the objectification of his experience. He claimed that his master was the "author" of his whipping (*My Bondage* 160) and that the overseer, in whipping slaves, "had written his character on the living parchment of [the slaves's] backs" (177). Once he is freed from slavery, when he becomes a speaker for the abolitionist movement, Douglass describes Garrison as taking him as his "text." Douglass was introduced in those early years as an orator, "a graduate from the peculiar institution . . . with [his] diploma written on his back" (359). Douglass was also cautioned against speaking of anything more than his own experiences as a slave or venturing to give any personal opinions on slavery. It was said to him: "Better have a little of the plantation manner of speech than not; 'tis not best that you seem to learned" (362). Moreover, in many of his early speeches, Douglass echoes slavery's definition of him as a piece of property, even as he argues against that definition. For example, in his early years he was introduced to his

audience “as a ‘chattel,’--a ‘thing’--a piece of southern property’--with the assurance that ‘it’ could speak. In fact, he sometimes used the same terminology to refer to himself” (Blassingame 1-li).

Douglass’s 1855 revision, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, dramatizes the emergence of his internally persuasive discourse and its growing tension with the authoritative discourse of the abolitionist movement. For example, Douglass explains that in his speeches, abolitionists encouraged him to be himself and tell his story, but he complains that he was no longer content “writing in the spaces left” of texts written by whites: “I could not always obey, for now I was writing and thinking. New views of the subject were presented to my mind. It did not entirely satisfy me to *narrate* wrongs; I felt like *denouncing* them. . . . Besides, I was growing, and needed room” (*My Bondage* 362). Douglass needed the room of his own pages on which to write. Moreover, he begins here to develop his strong pattern of linking literacy with orality, indicating that alone, neither provide sufficient conditions for freedom.

By 1855, the introductions of him as a “thing” which Douglass had earlier embraced became to him “an anathema, smacking of paternalism and racism” (Blassingame li). In essence, Douglass moved beyond his objectification by the abolitionists to a new kind of subjectivity even as they resisted his efforts to grow beyond the bounds of his identity as a slave. As he became more literate, Douglass grew increasingly discontented with a representation of himself only as a slave. “He was tired about all the conjecture of his not having truly been a slave and suggestions that he was not able to write his own speeches. He could damn well read and write; he had been a slave, but slavery had not left him a beast to be displayed; he was not a black dummy manipulated by a white ventriloquist” (113). Douglass moved beyond being Garrison’s “text” to authoring his own text.



Douglass's ultimate break with the Garrisonian abolitionists centered around two issues of literacy which reiterate the "thinking and writing" duality mentioned earlier: Douglass's desire to print and edit his own newspaper and interpretation of the Constitution. Both of these incidents resulted from Douglass's desire to assert his independence both as a writer and as a reader of texts. Upon returning from an extended trip to England, Douglass planned to purchase a press and begin his own newspaper to enter into the public debate about slavery without the Garrisonian's protective arm. Douglass claimed, again using the writing/thinking connection, "I already saw myself wielding my pen, as well as my voice, in the great work of renovating the public mind, and building up a public sentiment which should, at least, send slavery and oppression to the grave, and restore to 'liberty and the pursuit of happiness' the people with whom I had suffered, both as a slave and as a freeman" (*My Bondage* 392-393). Douglass had some reservations about taking on the role of editor and printer and was opposed vehemently in his efforts by the abolitionists in America for several reasons. He explains: "First, the paper was not needed; secondly it would interfere with my usefulness as a lecturer; thirdly I was better fitted to speak than to write; fourthly the paper could not succeed" (393). Moreover, Douglass feared that his failure with his newspaper might "contribute another proof to the mental and moral deficiencies of my race" (393). His doubts indicate that Douglass was still working with the assumptions about blacks and literacy outlined by Gates. But that didn't stop him. His newspaper, *The North Star*, later to become *Frederick Douglass Paper*, proved to be very successful because it acknowledges Douglass's belief that "[o]ur relation to the American people makes us in some sense a peculiar class, and unless we speak separately, our voice is not heard" (*Life* 484).<sup>18</sup>

In the second issue of literacy underscoring Douglass's developing sense of autonomy, he ultimately broke with Garrison over their differing interpretations of the Constitution. Garrison was committed to the belief that the Constitution was a pro-slavery document and that the union with slaveholding states should be dissolved. As an objection to the union with slaveholding states, the Garrisonians refused to vote. For years Douglass "advocated [this position] with his pen and tongue" (*My Bondage* 396). But ultimately, in a move which illustrates Douglass's emerging critical literacy, he reconsiders this blind devotion to Garrison's perspective:

[U]pon a reconsideration of the whole subject, I became convinced that there was no need for dissolving the union . . . that to seek this dissolution was no part of my duty as an abolitionist; that to abstain from voting, was to refuse to exercise a legitimate and powerful means of abolishing slavery and that the constitution of the United States not only contains no guarantees in favor of slavery but on the contrary, it is, in its letter and spirit, an antislavery document, demanding the abolition of slavery as a condition of its own existence as the supreme law of the land. (396)

Here, Douglass refuses to give up his power to vote, which is the act of a literate populace. He recognizes that Garrison can afford to give up that literate power precisely because he already possesses it. But Douglass, who has been denied the power to vote, recognizes that the literate act as essential to his own independent identity. Ultimately, Douglass's change in doctrine hinges on the development and embrace of his literate skills. He had previously assumed the constitution to be just what Garrison's interpretation made it because Douglass had little faith in his own ability to interpret the document:

I was bound, not only by their superior knowledge, to take their opinions as the true ones, in respect to the subject, but also because I had no means of showing their unsoundness. But for the responsibility of conducting a public journal and the necessity

imposed upon me by the abolitionists in this state, I should in all probability have remained as firm in my disunion views as any other disciple of William Lloyd Garrison. . . . [But] my new circumstances compelled me to rethink the whole subject and to study, with some care, not only the just and proper rules of legal interpretation, but the origin, design, nature, rights, powers and duties of civil government, and also the relations which human beings sustain by it. By such a course of thought and reading, I was conducted to the conclusion that the constitution of the United States . . . could not have been designed to maintain a system . . . like slavery. (397)

By dramatizing his break with the Garrisonians (again through thought and writing), Douglass works against their discourse and against their image of him as an uncritical disciple. Bakhtin describes this stage in developing literateness as a time when “someone is striving to liberate himself from the influence of such an image and its discourse by means of objectification, or is struggling to expose the limitations of both image and discourse. The importance of struggling with another’s discourse, its influence in the history of the individual’s coming to ideological consciousness, is enormous. One’s own discourse and one’s own voice, although born of another or dynamically stimulated by another, will sooner or later begin to liberate themselves from the authority of another’s discourse” (348). Douglass’s own newspaper and his new interpretation of the Constitution are born of his relationship with the Garrisonian abolitionists, but as he matures, his critical literateness allows him to liberate himself from the authority of those who wish to define him.

This is especially evident in the *Life and Times*, written well after slavery was abolished. In this version of the narrative, Douglass no longer feels it necessary to keep secret the details of his escape from slavery. Interestingly, he explains that he was able to escape by using the masters’ assumptions about literacy against them: “My means of escape were provided for me by the very men who were making laws to hold and bind me more

securely in slavery” (197). Free blacks in the state of Maryland were required to carry “free papers” with them, which included a description of the owner. But Douglass explains that this use of literacy to control blacks “in some measure defeated itself, since more than one man could be found to answer to the same description. Hence many slaves could escape by impersonating the owner of one set of papers” (197). These papers were frequently transferred among blacks to help each other escape from slavery.

Douglass did not use these free papers, but he did have a sailor friend, who had a sailor’s protection, “which somewhat answered the purpose of free papers” (199). “The instrument had at its head the American eagle, which gave it the appearance of an authorized document” (198). Even though Douglass looked nothing like the man described on the document, the mere fact that the document was “official looking” was enough to protect him in his flight north. The telling of this story indicates that because many literate white men had not grasped the necessary coexistence of “writing and thinking,” Douglass is able to use the white man’s belief in the power of literacy against him, as a means to escape from bondage.

There are other significant changes to Douglass’s description of his life as a slave in the revision. Eric Sundquist explains that many recent literary critics have expressed a preference for the 1845 version over *My Bondage and My Freedom* and especially over the “more self-indulgent” *Life and Times*, indicating “a distrust of the patriotic rhetoric, the gothic and sentimental literary conventions, and the myth of self-made success that are more characteristic of the later volumes” (4), all of which critics have seen as weaknesses. The distaste for the later versions as being less existential, more crafted, and more conscious leads to a paradox: “the less like a slave [Douglass] acted or sounded, the less likely audiences were to believe his story”

(4) or to value his writing. What these criticisms seem not to recognize is that the process of developing literateness, for any individual, requires a period of experimentation with literary conventions.

Overall, the 1855 revision indicates a writer with more conscious control over his subject and a greater sense of the relationship he has with his audience. Douglass more frequently addresses his audience; he analyzes events to a greater extent, venturing to engage in a harsher denunciation of the evils of slavery and to work against many of the common prejudices against blacks. For example, Douglass is aware of those whites who attribute his skills as a writer to the blood of his white father. In response to these prejudiced accusations, in the first revision of the narrative Douglass attributes his love of letters to his dark-skinned mother:

I learned, after my mother's death, that she could read, and she was the only one of all the slaves and colored people in Tuckahoe who enjoyed that advantage . . . I can . . . finally and proudly ascribe to her an earnest love of knowledge . . . and in view of that fact, I am quite willing and even happy, to attribute any love of letters I possess and for which I have got--despite of prejudices--only too much credit, not to my admitted Anglo-Saxon paternity, but to the native genius of my sable, unprotected, and uncultivated mother--a woman, who belonged to a race whose mental endowments it is, at present, fashionable to hold in disparagement and contempt. (58)

As this revision shows, if Douglass does begin to adopt the rhetoric and the conventions of his culture, he does so in order to critique the prejudiced beliefs of his white audience. Moreover, the form of the autobiography becomes less and less dictated by the demands of a white audience. The revised narrative, for example, does not have the "authenticating documents" from prominent whites, since Douglass's reputation stood on its own. In *My Bondage, My Freedom*, the letters by Garrison and Phillips are replaced with an Editor's

Preface which includes a letter written by Douglass himself and an Introduction by a black physician Dr. James McCune Smith. *Life and Times* opens with an Introduction by Mr. George L. Ruffin. In addition, Douglass also includes many of his speeches and newspaper articles in the revised versions of the narrative. In this sense the document becomes more diverse in that it incorporates his acts of orality into its written framework, in addition to the fact that the prose itself, as Eric J. Sundquist notes, becomes more “oratorical.”

In the later versions of the narrative, Douglass seems to feel comfortable with the many different selves from which his writing emerges, as well as the complexity of his reading audience. He is aware that his white readers may object to things he has written, but he is able to acknowledge that his differing audiences have different needs and he is willing to address and accommodate those differences. For example, in writing to a mixed audience he explains:

It will be seen in these pages that I have lived several lives in one . . . the life of slave . . . of a fugitive slave, of comparative freedom, of conflict and battle, of victory. If I have pushed my example too prominently for the good taste of my Caucasian readers I beg them to remember that I have written in part for the encouragement of a class whose aspirations need the stimulus of success. ( 487)

This ability to handle the changing complexities of audience was a conflict which Douglass constantly struggled with in his later years. He seemed to realize there were different kinds of language to be used for different audiences and that to be effective, his literacy must be able to shift according to those differences, to embrace a double-voicedness: “There are some things which ought to be said to colored people in the peculiar circumstances in which they are placed, that can be said more effectively among ourselves, without

the presence of white persons. We are the oppressed, the whites are the oppressors, and the language I would address to one is not always suited to the other” (qtd. in Blassingame xlv).

Once slavery was abolished, Douglass experienced a difficult transition in his sense of purpose, since the cause for which he had directed his life had changed. He no longer was asked to speak to white audiences about abolition. He explains that “Outside the thoughts of slavery my thoughts had not been much directed, and I could hardly hope to make myself useful in any other cause than that to which I had given twenty five years of my life” (*Life* 381). In *Life and Times* Douglass dramatizes a transitional experience in his writing and speaking. Asked to speak to a college audience for the first time after slavery has been abolished, he approaches another stage in his developing literateness. At first, Douglass is unsure of what to speak about before a highly educated audience:

The puzzling question now was, what should I say if I go there? It won't do to give them an old fashioned anti-slavery discourse. But what shall I talk about? . . . For many nights I toiled, and succeeded at least in getting something together in due form. Written orations had not been in my line. I had usually depended upon my unsystematized knowledge and the inspiration of the hours and the occasion, but I had now got “the scholar bee in my bonnet” and supposed inasmuch as I was to speak to college professors and students, I must at least make a show of some familiarity with letters. It proved as to its immediate effect, a great mistake, for my carefully studied and written address, full of learned quotations, fell dead at my feet, while a few remarks I made extemporaneously . . . were enthusiastically received. (382)

Essentially, Douglass's conflict here emerges out of his identity as a literate being, which had always been connected to his ability to write “in the spaces left” by the discourse of the master, and out of a sense of personal responsibility as a survivor of slavery. By trying to adopt the language of the

scholar in this lecture, Douglass momentarily places himself back into the position of echoing the words of the master or being the ventriloquist for the abolitionists. He ultimately realizes, however, that even though slavery has been abolished, the “pen and the tongue” still had much work to do in the fight for equality. When he learns that the president and the faculty of the college were distressed that he, a black man, was asked to speak at their institution, he begins to understand the discrepancy between the word of the law of abolition and the spirit of the law, just as he had earlier articulated the discrepancy between the words of Christianity and the deeds of the slaveholders. As Douglass states about a similar experience of ostracism upon being selected as a delegate to a national political convention: “They, dear fellows, found it much more agreeable to talk of the principles of liberty as glittering generalities, than to reduce those principles to practice” (395).

Ultimately, Douglass understands that his power as an orator and writer rests not in echoing the authoritative discourse of his scholarly audience, but in continuing to speak and write in a manner which recognizes what he learned in the shores of the Chesapeake Bay, that is, by privileging the spirit of the law over the written word of the law. As he states soon after his experience with the college audience: “I . . . soon found out that the negro had still a cause, and that he needed my voice and my pen with others to plead for it” (385-6).

Douglass achieves this multivocal literacy by continuing to rely on his “unsystematized knowledge and the inspiration of the hours and the occasion” to guide his voice and pen. He ultimately finds success as a writer and lecturer after slavery by relying on his reputation and continuing to refine his skills as an orator. He knows how to command an audience of whites: “I had an audience ready made in the free states; one which thirty years of labor had prepared for me, and before this audience the freedmen of the South needed a



advocate as much as they needed a member of Congress” (407). He also understands that in his career as a public speaker he must go beyond mere words to work towards achieving equality for his people. “I never rise to speak before an American audience without something of the feeling that my failure or success will bring blame or benefit to my whole race” (385).

Rather than working to adopt the language of the scholar, Douglass acknowledges the importance of his own voice in the fight for equality. In perhaps his deepest and most sophisticated insight into his own literate identity, Douglass acknowledges the differences between his own act of storytelling and those of the masters and scholars, reiterating the value of his own literacy in the the chronicling of American history:

I have written out my experiences here not to exhibit my wounds and bruises to awaken and attract sympathy to myself personally, but as part of the history of a profoundly interesting period in American life and progress. I have meant it to be a small individual contribution to the sum of knowledge of this special period, to be handed down to after-coming generations which may want to know what things were allowed and what prohibited; what moral, social, and political relations subsisted between the different varieties of American people down to the last quarter of the nineteenth century; and by what means they were modified and changed. The time is at hand when the last American slaveholder will disappear behind the curtain which separates the living from the dead, and when neither master nor slave will be left to tell the story of their respective relations and what happened in those relations to either. *My part has been to tell the story of the slave* (emphasis added). They have had all the talent and genius that wealth and influence could command to tell their story. They have had their full day in court. Literature, theology, philosophy, law and learning have come to their service and if condemned they have not been condemned unheard. (487)

That important sentence, “My part has been to tell the story of the slave” speaks volumes about Douglass’s understanding of the fractured nature of the master discourse of American history and of the important role his story plays in that history. Certainly Douglass’s “small individual contribution,” combined

with the other stories of literacy that follow in this study, continue to fill in the spaces which those histories have left unwritten and unspoken.

## NOTES TO CHAPTER I

1. Henry Louis Gates reminds us that almost all slave narratives published between 1789 and 1865 refer to literacy by vividly recounting scenes of instruction and by dramatizing slaveholder's admonishments against slave literacy. See his "Introduction" to *The Slave's Narrative*. In *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*, Gates explains that this scene of instruction is a revision of the trope of the "talking book" which occurs in earlier slave narratives. See Chapter 4: "The Trope of the Talking Book."

2. For versions of this argument see Gates, Chapter 1: "Literary Theory and the Black Tradition" in *Figures in Black: Words, Signs and the "Racial Self";* see also Gates's "Introduction" to "Race," *Writing and Difference* and *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Criticism*; Gates's "Introduction" to *The Slave's Narrative* and "James Gronniosaw and the Trope of the Talking Book" in *Afro-American Autobiography, A Collection of Critical Essays*. Gates's work fully explores the origins and implications of this literacy-freedom connection, tracing it back to the trope of the talking book in early narratives and exploring its revision in later narratives. He also explores the implications of this relationship, explaining that African-American writing, because it responded to this "arbitrary relationship" outlined by white oppressors, is inextricably linked to white racist assumptions and thus black writers are complicit in a system which further enslaved them.

The trope of literacy and freedom in slave narratives and its implications is also discussed in the work of Robert B. Stepto, *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative*; Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* and *The Journey Back: Issues in Black Literature and Criticism*. See also James Olney, "I Was Born:" Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature" and William L. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865*.

3. Douglass's attitude toward literacy before he is literate is similar to that described by anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss in the chapter "The Writing Lesson" of his study *Tristes Tropiques*. When introduced to the technology of writing, illiterate members of the Nambikwara tribe of Brazil immediately grasped the symbolic power of literacy, without knowing how to use it. "Writing had, on that occasion, . . . been borrowed as a symbol and for a sociological rather than an intellectual purpose, while its reality remained unknown. It had not been a question of acquiring knowledge, of remembering and understanding, but rather of increasing the authority and prestige of one individual . . . at the expense of others" (335-336).

Walter Ong also explains that oral cultures frequently attribute a kind of magical power to words. When writing is introduced, it "is often regarded at first as an instrument of secrecy and power. . . . The Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe describes how in an Ibo village the one man who knew how to read

hoarded in his house every bit of printed material that came his way--newspapers, cartons, receipts. It all seemed too remarkable to throw away" (92).

4. Annette Niemtow, in "The Problematic of Self in Autobiography: The Example of the Slave Narrative" explains that for Douglass (as for many black autobiographers) "the recognition that reading is an entry to freedom is not a self-conceived notion, but, like cleanliness, a standard defined by whites. Douglass conceives of a self which he will form in opposition to his master's wishes, but ironically he forms it within his master's rules. Reading, like autobiography itself in the nineteenth century, provides an entry to the kind of self acceptable to white culture" (101).

5. Walter Ong reminds us of the dangers of using the term "pre-literate" to describe cultures of primary orality. "Although the term 'pre-literate' itself is useful and at times necessary, if used unreflectively it also presents problems which are the same as those presented by the term 'oral literature,' if not quite so assertive. 'Pre-literate' presents orality--the 'primary modeling system'--as an anachronistic deviant from the 'secondary modeling system that followed it" (13). In the case of Frederick Douglass, however, who is on the threshold of literacy, the term pre-literate works to capture his position of being informed about the technology of literacy even though he is not yet capable of reading or writing. See *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*.

6. William L. Andrews discusses the "interstitial autobiographer" and the issue of liminality in Afro-American fiction in *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865*. Andrews explains that interstitial autobiographers "depict themselves as 'betwixt and between' standard identifying classifications and norms . . . In the cracks and crevices of the social hierarchy, the interstitial figure creates his own fluid status and unlikely freedom . . . Such figures mediate and often reverse the binary oppositions between the hierarchical states to which they are marginal" (173). The resulting position of liminality, explains Andrews, acts as "a condition of psycholiterary freedom" (179). Andrews believes that the autobiographical act itself allows escaped slaves to "affirm their liminality as a 'potentializing' phase in which indeterminacy signifies a host of possibilities, not simply a loss of center" (202).

Henry Louis Gates also refers to liminality in "James Gronniosaw and the Trope of the Talking Book." Gates sees acts of reading and writing as ways to "transgress" the realm of liminality that he sees as a negative position. Gates's use of liminality arises from Robert Pelton's use of the term in *The Trickster in West Africa*. See also Houston Baker's use of the term liminality in *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*. Baker's use of the term is taken from Victor Turner's work. Turner observes that "liminality [a transitional or marginal state] is pure potency, where anything can happen, where immoderacy is normal, even normative, and where elements of culture and society are released from their customary

configurations and recombined in bizarre and terrifying imagery.” Baker is discussing the role of myth in Afro-American literature. See p. 116.

7. See, for example, Keith Byerman, “We Wear the Mask: Deceit as Theme and Style in Slave Narratives” in *The Art of Slave Narrative: Original Essays in Criticism and Theory*.

8. Bakhtin explains that all language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes “one’s own” only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions: it is from here that one must take the word and make it one’s own. (293-94)

This conception of language is especially relevant to writers like Douglass, who are caught between conflicting worlds. W.E.B. Dubois’s conception of the “double consciousness” experienced by African-Americans is similar to Bakhtin’s idea about language. Much has been written about the double voices of the narrative and the conflict experienced by Douglass as a result of his position on the borderline between south and north, between black and white culture. See for example, Annette Niemtow, “The Problematic of Self in Autobiography: The Example of the Slave Narrative.” See also Eric J. Sundquist’s, “Introduction” to *Frederick Douglass: New Literary and Historical Essays*, 1-22. Also see Wilson J. Moses, “Frederick Douglass and the Constraints of Racialized Writing” in Sundquist, 66-83.

9. Steven Mailloux reminds us that Douglass’s comments on Christianity and slavery were part of a larger cultural debate in the 1840’s over the Bible politics. According to Mailloux, in these comments and in the Appendix to the 1845 *Narrative*, Douglass enters directly into a “multifaceted and highly contested Bible politics of interpretation” (20). See “Misreading as a Historical Act: Cultural Rhetoric, Bible Politics and Fuller’s 1845 Review of Douglass’s *Narrative*.” For more on Douglass and his relationship to Bible politics see Janet Duitsman Cornelius, “*When I Can Read My Title Clear*”: Literacy, Slavery and Religion in the Antebellum South.

10. Mailloux argues that Douglass’s identity as an escaped slave provided him a different locus of interpretation than those outside or inside the circle of slavery because his acts of reading slavery occurred from both positions simultaneously. “Douglass does identify two positions from which the slave songs can be read: from inside the slave’s experience and from outside that viewpoint. . . . However, Douglass actually represents himself as occupying a

third position which is neither insider nor outsider but a combination of the two . . . Only interpreters occupying the subject position of fugitive slave can correctly read the slave's song" (9-10). One needs the distance that Douglass has from the experience to provide an authoritative reading. See "Misreading as a Historical Act: Cultural Rhetoric, Bible Politics and Fuller's 1845 Review of Douglass's *Narrative*."

11. Walter Ong explains the experience of this apostrophe by claiming that "the interiorizing force of the oral word relates in a special way to the sacral, to the ultimate concerns of existence . . . the spoken word is always an event, a movement in time" (74-75). Many other critics focus on the content and style of the apostrophe, seeing it as problematic, instead of liberating, that is the result of the experience of speaking aloud for Douglass. For other discussions of Douglass's apostrophe, see G. Thomas Couser, *Altered Egos: Authority in American Autobiography*, 151-155. See also David Van Leer, "The Anxiety of Ethnicity in Douglass's *Narrative*" in Sundquist, 118-140.

12. David Van Leer, in "The Anxiety of Ethnicity in Douglass's *Narrative*" in Sundquist, 118-140, claims that Sandy represents "that authentic African experience to which Douglass is himself attracted despite a residual skepticism." For Van Leer, the root "epitomizes for Douglass Sandy's allegiance to a black religious tradition not reconciled to Judeo-Christian practices" (125), though Douglass's relation to the root is ambiguous, since in later revisions he regards it with scorn. "A synecdoche for folk medicine (as religion) the root more generally represents Douglass's black heritage, those 'roots' that slavery repeatedly silences" (126). See also Annette Niemtzw, "The Problematic of Self in Autobiography: The Example of the Slave Narrative." Houston Baker also discusses the root episode in *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*. Keith Byerman, in "We Wear the Mask: Deceit as Theme and Style in Slave Narratives," sees the use of the root as a kind of trickery or "manipulation involv[ing] the use of folk practices to achieve some control over whites" (73).

13. Walter Ong offers a possible explanation for this when he claims that "[f]or an oral culture, learning or knowing means achieving close, empathetic, communal identification with the known . . . writing [or literacy] separates the knower from the known and thus sets up conditions for 'objectivity,' in the sense of personal disengagement or distancing" (44). The kind of analysis offered of the songs by Douglass results from his roots in the oral culture of slavery combined with the distance and objectivity gained in the process of becoming literate. Ong goes on to explain that the kind of self-analysis Douglass offers in this section results from the kind of objectivity and distance afforded by writing (54).

Steven Mailloux presents a similar reading of the songs section of the narrative, explaining that "Douglass complicates what counts as the conditions of correct reading by placing himself first inside and then outside the experience of slavery and suggests that it is precisely the history of changing

places that . . . gives [Douglass his rhetorical authority]. Only interpreters occupying the subject position of fugitive slave can correctly read the slaves' songs" (10). See "Misreading as a Historical Act: Cultural Rhetoric, Bible Politics and Fuller's 1845 Review of Douglass's *Narrative*."

14. The same situation is repeated with Mr. Gore: "There must be no answering back to him; no explanation was allowed a slave, showing himself to have been wrongfully accused . . . to be accused was to be convicted, and to be convicted was to be punished; the one always followed the other with immutable certainty" (267). Slavery thoroughly corrupts the rules of rhetoric, since the word of the slave is repeatedly shown to be ignored or without any authority. For example, when Douglass is attacked and badly beaten in Baltimore, he finds he cannot have his attackers arrested, since his word is worthless unless a white man would come forward and testify on his behalf. A lawyer, explains Douglass, "could issue no warrant on my word. If I had been killed in the presence of a thousand colored people, their testimony combined would have been insufficient to have arrested one of the murderers" (314).

15. In "Frederick Douglass's *Life and Times*: Progressive Rhetoric and the Problem of Constituency," Kenneth W. Warren likens Douglass to other social reformers (among them, naturalist and realist novelists) in that he used his autobiography as an avenue of democratic representation to speak on behalf of silenced African-Americans. The problem with this, argues Warren, is similar to the problem experienced by realist and naturalist novelists, in that "the intelligent, articulate spectator, while attempting to reveal the details of these mute silenced lives, distances himself from those he represents, making them other than himself, and confines them to a realm, outside of that inhabited by the spectator. The condition of representation seems to be alienation" (257). Warren likens Douglass, in his later life, to Henry James in their belief in the "missionary potential of the educated voice" (262). "Concerned with the vulgarity they thought they saw destroying the fiber of American public life, both men sought to play the role of social missionary or popular prophet" (264).

For a similar discussion about the alienation inherent in acts of political representation, see Michael Warner's *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth Century America*.

16. In his "Introduction" to *Frederick Douglass: New Literary and Historical Essays*, Eric J. Sundquist characterizes the revisions of Douglass's autobiographies as a "lifelong series of reinterpretations of his life" (5). Sundquist argues that *My Bondage, My Freedom* is marked by "its forceful invocation of republican principles and the rights of revolution, [and] . . . by the versatile rhetoric of the escaped slave turned public orator" (1). Douglass's *Life and Times* is also marked by its spirit of self-reliance, industry and economy which "has led commentators to dub him a 'black Franklin' or a 'black Horatio Alger'" (17).

17. For other discussions of Douglass's conflicts in writing, see Wilson J. Moses, "Writing Freely? Frederick Douglass and the Constraints of Racialized Writing" and David Van Leer's "Reading Slavery: The Anxiety of Ethnicity in Douglass's *Narrative*"; Kenneth Warren's "Frederick Douglass's *Life and Times*: Progressive Rhetoric and the Problem of Constituency" and Eric Sundquist's "Introduction" all found in *Frederick Douglass: New Literary and Historical Essays*.

18. In describing Douglass's newspaper, Eric J. Sundquist claims that "Douglass's editorial role gained him a wider audience . . . and crystallized his personal campaign to make his literacy the most potent weapon in his campaign against slavery . . . the *North Star* made Douglass more independent of the abolitionists and gave him the opportunity to speak out on a variety of issues, further defining his campaign as one for human rights, not just African-American rights" (10). For more in Douglass's journalism career, see "'We Hold These Truths to Be Self-Evident': The Rhetoric of Frederick Douglass's Journalism" by Shelley Fisher Fishkin and Carla L. Peterson.



## CHAPTER II

### “TO SORROW OR REBEL?” LITERACY AS ECONOMIC AND RELIGIOUS SALVATION IN *RUTH HALL* AND *THE WIDE, WIDE WORLD*

Every written . . . sentence, not calculated to benefit mankind,  
carries with it, I verily believe, its own antidote in the shape of  
narrowness and bigotry.

--Fanny Fern

It might seem like an enormous leap to move from a discussion of Frederick Douglass to an exploration of novelists Susan Warner and Fanny Fern. After all, these women writers are distinct from Douglass by virtue of many factors, including race, gender, class, geography and even genre. When we think of Frederick Douglass, we generally consider his public discourse as an autobiographical and factual chronicle of slavery. On the other hand, Susan Warner and Fanny Fern are usually remembered as sentimental novelists whose writings are thought of as escapist, far removed from the cultural politics of slavery.

Douglass (1817-1895), Warner (1819-1885), and Fern (1811-1872), however, were contemporaries and all enjoyed considerable fame in their lifetimes as a result of their careers as writers. In the same antebellum years that Douglass wrote and spoke as an abolitionist, Warner wrote and published one of the most successful novels of the nineteenth century and Fanny Fern became the first and most widely read female newspaper columnist of her times. Through their literate acts each of these figures confronted public discourses on religion, slavery and economics, illuminating the complex relationship between literacy, politics and cultural authority. As Karen Sanchez-Eppler explains, the period of the early 1830's through the Civil War saw the “convergence of two rhetorics of social protest: the abolitionist concern

with claiming personhood for the racially distinct and physically owned slave body, and the feminist concern with claiming personhood for the sexually distinct and domestically circumscribed female body” (1).

To illustrate just how interconnected the concerns of these writers were, it is helpful to turn to Jane Tompkins’s analysis of the central issues at work in domestic fiction, which could apply as well to the slave narrative genre. In *Sensational Designs*, Tompkins argues that

domestic fiction is preoccupied, even obsessed with the nature of power. Because they lived in a society that celebrated free enterprise and democratic government but were excluded from participating in either, two questions female novelists never fail to ask are: what is power and where is it located? Since they could neither own property, nor vote, nor speak at a public meetings if both sexes were present, women had to have a way of defining themselves which gave them power and status nevertheless, in their own eyes and in the eyes of the world. That is the problem that sentimental fiction addresses. (161)

The preoccupation with power that Tompkins associates with domestic fiction is the very problem addressed by Frederick Douglass in his public discourse. An even more specific version of that question explored by Fern, Warner and Douglass, which this chapter will take up, is: how is power related to literacy?

Jane Tompkins’s central thesis in *Sensational Designs* is that in order for literary texts to be fully appreciated, they must be understood in the cultural context in which they were produced. According to Tompkins, the representation of power in sentimental fiction is a reflection of the political, religious and economic conditions under which such novels were written. In her reading of nineteenth-century culture, the “one great fact of American life” during this period was the revival movement. She points to the activities and literature of the American Tract society as the primary influence on sentimental novelists.

As Tompkins sees it, novels like *The Wide, Wide World* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* reflected the values of a revival movement that related a theory of power in which "all true action is not material, but spiritual; that one obtains spiritual power through prayer; and those who know how, in the privacy of their own closets, to struggle for possession of their souls will one day possess the world through the power given to them by God" (151). This cultural mythology shaped early nineteenth-century perceptions of reality. Tompkins explains that "when you turn from the tract society reports, religious narratives, educational manuals and autobiographical documents [of the revival movement] to the fiction of writers like Stowe and Warner, you find the same assumptions at work. The novels are motivated by the same millennial commitment; they are hortatory and instructional in the same way; they tell the same kinds of stories" (159). Tompkins uses this shared cultural mythology to explain the nature of power put forth in these fictions. In sentimental fiction, power is embedded in an ethic of submission. As Tompkins explains:

American women simply could not assume a stance of open rebellion against the conditions of their lives for they lacked the material means of escape or opposition. *They had to stay put and submit.* And so the domestic novelists made that necessity the basis on which to build a power structure of their own. Instead of rejecting the culture's value system outright, they appropriated it for their own use, subjecting the beliefs and customs that had molded them into a series of transformations that allowed them both to fulfill and transcend their appointed roles. (161) (emphasis added)

Although Tompkins's assessment of the options for American women is accurate in the examples she cites, her prescriptions about women's access to power preclude other potential choices for women. The limitation in Tompkins's line of reasoning is twofold: in the first place, the very same

cultural conditions she discusses produced other marginalized writers, Douglass and Fern among them, who did not “stay put and submit” but instead managed to resist the material conditions of their lives; in the second place, as published authors, they *all* had access to a powerful means of escape and opposition: public discourse. While Tompkins’s argument may explain the submissive course of action chosen by the fictional characters Ellen Montgomery and Uncle Tom, it does not acknowledge the fact that Susan Warner, even as she created the character of Ellen, had a number of choices about what kind of novels she would write and which niche in the literary marketplace she would fill. Susan Warner chose to write didactic fiction which reinforced a patriarchal ideology because she was probably unwilling to deal with the financial and moral risks of writing fiction that resisted women’s prescribed role in society. Warner’s financial situation made her unwilling to take the risk of producing material that didn’t have an already established audience. But even as Warner made the choice to write religious fiction that she was quite sure would sell rapidly, she was using literacy as a means of material resistance. She chose not to submit to the economic conditions that she found herself in, namely the loss of her family fortune. As Susan Coultrap-McQuin explains: “Economic gain was important to most women writers, whereas their socialization as women had encouraged them to value moral, spiritual, and cultural aspects of life. The result was that they often affirmed noncommercial values while competing for a good income” (44). <sup>1</sup>

According to Tompkins, financial conditions dictated that Warner write religious fiction, that she submit to the expectations and demands of her audience. This line of reasoning eliminates the possibility that Warner did have a choice to perhaps write the kind of fiction typical of her contemporary Fanny Fern. Fern also wrote as a means of financial empowerment, to feed herself

and her children after the death of her first husband. Fern made a different choice than Warner in terms of her place in the literary marketplace, but she was also financially successful in spite of her repeated efforts to resist audience expectations.

Moreover, there are definite limitations to Tompkins's argument that the ethic of submission led to an experience of transcendent power. Transcendent power can be a dangerous concept if it ignores the physical realities of oppression. The very real dangers of submission are illuminated in the writings of Douglass and Fern, both of whom fought against such an ethic even as they wrote texts of a didactic nature. For example, according to Frederick Douglass, an ethic of submission was dangerous in the context of slavery because it could be used as a justification for the murder and torture of slaves. For Fanny Fern, an ethic of submission was just a convenient way to silence women and victimize children.

It is important to remember that the very same religious revival that Tompkins identifies as the most important fact of American culture in the years before the civil war was also sweeping southern states and intersecting with the institution of slavery. Tract societies were distributing literature among southerners, calling attention to slaves' need for the Bible and producing material exclusively for the use of black groups. According to Janet Cornelius, in 1847 the American Tract society "went so far as to claim that slaves in the southern states were learning to read as a result of tract work" (127). The ethic of submission dictated by tract societies, which Tompkins discusses in terms of its effect on sentimental novels, had a more divisive effect in the south. If tracts were responsible for teaching slaves to read, then they might also be responsible for potential acts of resistance among literate slaves in a culture which deemed slave literacy to be illegal. Moreover, if such

tracts did instill an ethic of submission among human beings in bondage, then the repercussions of the revival movement were much more complicated than Tompkins's assessment acknowledges. The notion of transcendent power that she points to in the works of Stowe and Warner is revealed to be a privileged form of power, since it was used as a way to manipulate slaves to accept their own oppression. Set against the physical horrors of slavery, an ethic of submission only further victimizes those who do submit. As Frederick Douglass explains in the Appendix to his 1845 narrative:

He who proclaims it a religious duty to read the Bible denies me the right of learning to read the name of the God who made me . . . *Revivals of religion and revivals in the slave-trade go hand in hand together.* The slave prison and the church stand near to each other. The clanking of fetters and the rattling of chains in the prison and the pious psalm and solemn prayer in the church, may be heard at the same time. (327) (emphasis added)

According to Tompkins, revival activity necessarily resulted in fictional texts whose construction of power was based on the ethic of submission dictated by religious tracts. This argument, however, doesn't account for the fact that under the very same historical conditions, writers like Frederick Douglass and Fanny Fern provided very different (and quite popular) alternatives to such constructions of power. Fern and Douglass used their literacies to challenge cultural assumptions by appropriating and manipulating the privileged discourses of the culture. This potential choice and the resulting difficulty involved in producing popular texts while simultaneously resisting cultural expectations is unacknowledged in Tompkins's discussions of the cultural context in which *The Wide, Wide World* was produced. This rest of this chapter will reexamine Tompkins's understanding of sentimental power and its relationship to literacy through a comparison of Fanny Fern's novel, *Ruth Hall* and Susan Warner's *The Wide,*

*Wide World.*

Fanny Fern, Susan Warner and Frederick Douglass all used literacy for economic empowerment in a society which denied them equal financial opportunities. After his escape from slavery, Douglass made his living writing and speaking as an abolitionist. Fanny Fern's career as a journalist and novelist developed only after being left destitute after the death of her first husband. And Susan Warner wrote primarily as a means of supporting her family after devastating financial losses nearly left them bankrupt.

These writers also considered their writing to be didactic. They used their texts as means of teaching moral lessons to their readership. For Frederick Douglass, the goal in writing about his experiences was, in his words, to "throw light on the American slave system, and [to] hasten the glad day of deliverance to the millions of my brethren in bonds" (331). Likewise, Fanny Fern's didacticism is evident in comments she made about the reasons she kept on writing, even after she was financially secure. She asks:

What if you are so constituted that injustice and wrong to others rouses you as if it were done to yourself? What if the miseries of your fellow beings, particularly those you are powerless to relieve, haunt you day and night? What if you feel like rolling up your sleeves and engaging in deadly combat with every disgusting sham and humbug that comes in your way? (qtd. in Warren 257).

Her answer to that question: "You wonder if, you were to sit down and write about this evil if it would deter one [person] from such brutality" (104). For Susan Warner, authorship was an extension of her own religious theology. She saw her writing as akin to the work of a minister: to train her readers in the moral and spiritual values of evangelical Christianity.

The *means* of achieving moral ends and the conceptions of power embedded in these various literary efforts differ considerably. As discussed

above, the relationship between religion [or religious revivalism] and literacy was a central concern not only for the writers themselves, but for the protagonists of their respective literacy narratives as well. As chapter I clearly details, Frederick Douglass's 1845 slave narrative addresses the hypocrisy of slaveholders and revivalists alike who used religious literacy as a means of further oppressing slaves. For Douglass, giving Bibles to slaves who could not read, or teaching slaves only to read the Bible was cruel:

Away with all trifling with the man in fetters! Give a hungry man a stone, and tell him what beautiful houses are made of it,--give ice to a freezing man and tell him of its good properties in hot weather,--throw a drowning man a dollar, as a mark of your good will,--but do not mock the bondsman in his misery, by giving him a Bible when he cannot read it. (qtd. in Cornelius 131-132)

According to Douglass, "the Bible is peculiarly the companion of liberty. It belongs to a new order of things--slavery is of the old--and will only be made worse by an attempt to mend it with the Bible" (131). Douglass's words point to the limitations of religious literacy in a slave culture which denied slaves the acknowledgement of their humanity. For Douglass, the Bible is superfluous if a slave cannot read or if the realities of slave life contradict the master's interpretation of the written word. As a character within his 1845 narrative, he thus critiques the efforts of the revival movement.

Douglass's attitudes about the ethics of slavery are consistent with those of Susan Warner, as illustrated through the character of Daisy Randolph, the child-heroine of *Daisy*, a little known sentimental antislavery novel written by Warner in 1868. As Karen Sanchez-Eppler reminds us,

sentimental antislavery stories are constructed on the foundation of a presumed allegiance between abolitionist goals and domestic values, an alliance fraught with asymmetries and contradictions. The domestic realm of women and children occupies, after all, a paradoxical place in feminist and abolitionist argument. For feminists, it constitutes not only the source of women's power, but also, antithetically, the sphere in which she finds herself



incarcerated. For abolitionists, the domestic values that ostensible offer a positive alternative to the mores of plantation society simultaneously mask slavery's exploitations behind gentle features. (41-42)

The disjunction between the values of feminists and abolitionists is evident in Warner's domestic novel as Daisy narrates her experiences at Magnolia, her family's slaveholding plantation. Daisy focuses on her conflicts with her family over the ethics of slavery. Taking the high moral ground, Daisy protests the cruel treatment of slaves. Despite protests by other whites, she asserts that she would legally free her family's slaves if she were old enough.

Douglass and Warner both object to slavery, but their conceptions of the role literacy plays in resisting slavery's evils differ considerably. One of Daisy's primary assumptions in the novel is consistent with the values of revivalism: she assumes that slaves have been denied access to a spiritual life, so she organizes Bible prayer meetings for the slaves in order to address their needs as Christians, clearly adopting Tompkins's understanding of the transcendent power accessible through submission. Daisy seems less concerned with the physical freedom and material well being of her slaves than with their knowledge of the Bible. However, because Daisy provides slaves access to the Bible in defiance of her family's wishes, for her, even submission to divine authority requires a degree of resistance to earthly authorities.

Frederick Douglass's life and works reveal the dangers that such an ethic of submission poses for slaves. While submitting to the demands of the master and reading the Bible may provide access to spiritual transcendence, that submission offers no guarantee of physical protection. Sanchez-Eppler explains that like Daisy, the children in antislavery novels experience their own form of enslavement. She claims that "the family these children inhabit, and the lessons of patience and selflessness they are taught, reproduce under the

benign guide of domesticity a hierarchy structurally quite similar to that of slavery itself. The sentimental and domestic values engaged in the critique of slavery are compromised by the connection and implicated in the very patterns they are exposed to employ" (43).

It might seem ironic that Susan Warner would write what was essentially an abolitionist novel nearly four years after the Civil War had ended. The fact that she did indicates that slavery in this novel functions as little more than a device used to illustrate the moral conflict of the novel's protagonist. Daisy Randolph's conflicts have less to do with resisting slavery that they do with learning to submit to divine authority whatever the cost-- the kind of religious conflict typically experienced by Susan Warner heroines. Daisy Rudolph sees the potential spiritual benefits of reading the Bible for slaves. But these potential benefits are revealed to be worthless when one realizes that religious literacy was manipulated by slaveholders to further oppress slaves.

I use this particular example of Daisy Randolph for several reasons. First, it reveals that Warner and Douglass are engaged in somewhat similar efforts as writers. Second, it illustrates how differently literacy functions in those efforts. In *Daisy*, literacy is conceived of in a manner consistent with Jane Tompkins' assessment of sentimental power: the ability to read was necessary only to gain access to the Bible and to thus submit to the will of God. Even Warner's own acts of writing novels, while they succeeded in fighting the material oppression of poverty, were conceived as extensions of God's will. As Anna Warner said of her sister's bestseller, it "was written in closest reliance upon God: for thoughts, for power, for words. Not the mere vague wish to write a book that should do service to her master: but a vivid constant looking to him for guidance and help: the worker and her work both laid humbly at the Lord's

feet” (Edward Foster 34). Warner’s acts of writing, like the reading done by her female protagonists, were efforts to bring the individual closer to divine will. This interpenetration of literacy with an ethic of submission is vehemently rejected by Douglass in the context of slavery because it “bespeaks the dominance inherent in the act of representation” (Sanchez-Eppler 43). Yet such dominance lies at the heart of Susan Warner’s literacy narrative.

Fanny Fern’s attitudes about Calvinist theology echo Douglass’s distrust of religion and her acts of writing function in a manner to his. Brought up in a strict religious household with a father who was a deacon of the Park Street Church, Fern gained a reputation as a child for her strong resistance to the piety and obedience expected of proper young ladies. She spent her public career as a writer exposing what she believed to be the hypocrisy of religious revivalism. For Fern, literacy was not a means of submitting to cultural and divine authority, but a means of critiquing the fact that patriarchy had corrupted the discourse and the spirit of religion. Like Douglass, she used her literacy to expose the cruelty of a religious ethic of submission, especially in the case of children. Fern often claimed that trusting in God and waiting for divine providence to intervene in earthly affairs was useless advice. As she wrote: “If there is one piece of advice more bandied about by irresolution, imbecility and moral cowardice than [waiting for the Lord’s time], I shall be glad to know it. As I take it, the Lord’s time is the first time you get” (qtd. in Walker 108). Fern considered absolute faith in providence to be “a convenient scapegoat for all of the stupidity extant” and “a convenient theology for bad cooks, unwise schoolteachers and selfless, careless, ignorant parents” (108) and, Frederick Douglass might add, cruel slavemasters as well.

It might seem obvious Frederick Douglass would have a very different understanding of literacy and its relationship with prevailing ideologies of

cultural authority in nineteenth-century America than would Warner and Fern. But Douglass's race and his experiences as a slave don't account for all the differences, nor do they explain the important similarities. I am equally interested in the similarities *and* differences in the literacy narratives of Douglass, Warner and Fern. This strategy, as I discussed in my introduction, is what Myra Jehlen calls "radical comparativism," which is a method of comparison which repeatedly crosses boundaries of gender, race and class. My goal is to understand what factors account for the experience and the meaning of literacy in the lives of the writers themselves, as well as in the experiences of characters within their texts. It is understandable that Frederick Douglass would experience literacy much differently from Fern and Warner. Perhaps more importantly those differences can provide insight into the literacies of Warner and Fern, women whose social and economic backgrounds were quite similar.

For example, Douglass espouses the values of Christianity in much the same way that Susan Warner and Fanny Fern do; in the way that Jane Tompkins argues is typical of the time period. Yet within each writer's literacy narrative, an ethic of submission to Christian values frequently requires a simultaneous ethic of resistance to earthly authorities who claim to be acting as Christians but who are in fact corrupting Christian values. That need for simultaneous submission *and* resistance gets to the heart of the difficulty with Tompkins's discussion of the ethic of submission: it fails to acknowledge the fact that there is usually more than one authority requiring submission, especially for women, children and African-Americans; submitting to divine authority frequently requires resistance to earthly authorities or vice versa. In order for an individual to be truly empowered she must be able to differentiate among multiple authorities in order to minimize the potential for submission to

become victimization. Submission to external authority can fail to provide access to spiritual power if those authorities are oppressive.

For Frederick Douglass, Christian values directly conflict with cultural authorities who enslave him and who deny him access to literacy. For Ruth Hall, Christian values conflict with a patriarchal society and a cruel family who neglects her and who use an ethic of submission to keep her in a state of poverty and take away her children. For Ellen Montgomery, submissive Christian values sometimes conflict with demands made by unfair adults, but more frequently Christian values, as interpreted by her guardians, contradict Ellen's emotions and instincts and her own developing sense of self.

In each case, literacy is a vital element in this dramatic conflict. Southern slaveholders used literacy to exact submission in two ways: by either denying slaves access to literacy or by using religious texts to persuade slaves to accept their victimization. Similarly, patriarchal society attempted to maintain women's submission by discouraging women to take up the pen or by encouraging the reading of texts which reinforced a patriarchal ideology, including the Bible and the religious tracts. As Jane Tompkins explains, "the implantation of virtue was the primary goal of nearly everything nineteenth-century Americans read" (157).

For Fern, Warner, and Douglass, literacy worked in varying ways to help negotiate these conflicts. Both Douglass and Ruth Hall developed a literacy that enabled them to identify and critique the varying levels of cultural authority. As discussed in detail in the previous chapter, literacy is the means by which Douglass critiques the cultural politics of racism and slavery, an act which requires that he alternately submit to and resist the ethic of submission dictated by the divine textual authority (the Bible) and by human authorities. In order for Douglass to be a better Christian and to fulfill his divine will for the

benefit of mankind, he must be in control of a variety of levels of discourse: the master discourses of Christianity and of slavery as well as his own autobiographical discourse. Houston Baker describes this level of control as superliteracy. As Baker explains:

the African-American's negotiation of metalevels, in combination with his or her propensity for autobiography as a form of African survival, has always enabled him or her to control a variety of levels of discourse in the United States . . . The most forceful, expressive cultural spokespersons of Afro-America have traditionally been those who have first mastered a master discourse--at its most rarefied levels as well as at its quotidian performative levels--and then autobiographically, written themselves and their own metalevels palimpsestically on the scroll of such mastery. (*Workings* 43)

Baker claims that the successful African-American theorist (which he considers Douglass to be) must submit and resist simultaneously, by “master[ing] the very forms of enslavement in order to write . . . in empowering ways” (43). Such an act “constitutes an autobiographical revolution, an explosive superliteracy that writes, not in the terms of the other, but in the lines that adumbrate the suppressed story of an-other” (43). Baker’s superliteracy sounds a lot like Bakhtin’s idea of double-voiced discourse, which Bakhtin describes as discourse in which there are “two views, two meanings, and two expressions . . . which are dialogically related [or] in which a potential dialogue is embedded in them” (324-5).

This kind of superliteracy or metaliteracy requires the ability to recognize and negotiate many levels of authoritative discourse. Metaliteracy requires that one step outside a cultural ideology in order to examine it and avoid its potential for victimization. This is the kind of power exercised by Frederick Douglass when he stand ‘outside the circle’ of the slave songs and by Fanny Fern as she is denied access to the circle of privilege. It is very different

from the sentimental power at work in the fiction of Susan Warner. Rather than mastering varying levels of discourse, Ellen Montgomery is repeatedly mastered by submitting, through literacy, to the monological master discourse of Christianity. Her submission is not chosen of her own free will; she does not have the ability to critique the authoritative discourses which require her submission. There is no dialogue at work in her acts of reading. The rest of this chapter will attempt to account for the reason why Ellen fails to achieve metaliteracy.

In the final pages of both Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall* (1855) and Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850), the female protagonists characterize their literate selves with a navigation metaphor. Ellen Montgomery, the young girl whose struggles upon the loss of her mother are dramatized in Warner's novel, is discussing her experience of reading in the room newly set up for her by husband John Humphreys. Ellen says to John:

'I would a great deal rather read next door to you; you will help me out when I get into a puzzle.'

'Do you get into puzzles, still?' said he smiling.

'Not exactly a puzzle, perhaps--or if I do I commonly work it out--but I often launch out upon a sea where I dare not trust my own navigation, and am fain to lower sail and come back humbly to shore; but now I will take the pilot along,' she said joyously,--'and sail every wither.'

'Have with you,' said he smiling--'to the world's end!' (577)

Throughout Warner's novel, John is one of a series of literacy "pilots" Ellen depends on to censor her reading and provide interpretations of texts that she "puzzles" over.

While Ellen Montgomery rarely pilots her own ship, the successful authoress at the helm of Fanny Fern's best selling novel *Ruth Hall* "scribbles on, . . . rising high on the topmost wave . . . steering with straining sides, and a

heart of oak, for the nearing port of Independence" (133). In a conversation near the end of Fern's novel, Ruth Hall discusses with her publisher friend Mr. Walters the responses of women writers to the "promiscuous puffery" of disreputable critics. Ruth hopes for women writers to be like herself who would "disdain so to fetter criticism; who would launch their book like a gallant ship, prepared for adverse gales, not sneaking near the shore or lowering their flag for fear of a stray shot" (190-1).

These two navigation metaphors epitomize the opposing ideologies of female literacy dramatized in the novels. Ellen writes very little during the course of the novel, but for her reading is intimately tied to her religious training and an ethic of submission. Ellen's literacy is a relatively passive experience of dependence and self-abnegation. Her incessant reading of the Bible trains Ellen to deny her own powers of interpretation. Ellen learns not to "trust her own navigation" but instead relies upon the piloting of her brother-husband John Humphreys and other figures of authority scattered throughout the novel.

For Ellen, literacy is a *private* experience of retreat against the elements threatening to make her passions erupt. It is primarily a means of denying her sense of self. As Jane Tompkins explains, "the ideal of behavior to which [Warner's] novel educates its readers is the opposite of self-realization; it is to be empty of self, an invisible transparency" (182). To use Bakhtin's terminology, literacy for Ellen Montgomery is a process of internalizing the "authoritative discourse" of evangelical Christianity and repeatedly denying her own "internally persuasive discourse." In Jane Tompkins's assessment of the power structure in sentimental novels, she argues that true power is achieved through submission, which she describes as a "self-willed act of conquest of one's own passions" (162). Tompkins claims that Ellen's



submissiveness

is not capitulation to external authority, but the mastery of herself, and therefore, paradoxically, an assertion of authority . . . [because] 'submission' becomes 'self-conquest' and doing the will of one's husband or father brings an access to divine power. By conquering herself in the name of the highest possible authority, the dutiful woman merges her own authority with God's. (162)

What this argument fail to realize is that Ellen's need for self-conquest is dictated by external authorities. At the very moment that she is 'mastering herself' she is denying her own internally persuasive discourse in favor of male authority, which succeeds only in bringing her closer, emotionally and physically to male authority. Paradoxically, even though Ellen is engaged in exhaustive efforts at self-denial, she is a thoroughly narcissistic character.

Ruth Hall, who struggles throughout Fern's novel to earn a living to protect her children, uses literacy "like a gallant ship" to forge out upon the world and pilot her own course in the face of destructive elements such as cruel in-laws, selfish family members, and personal misfortune. Ruth's career as a successful authoress provides her with the economic power to perform her duties as a mother, as well as a means to tell her own story of oppression and assert her sense of self. For Ruth, writing is an act of participation in the *public* sphere and an avenue of protection against the evils facing a single mother alone in the nineteenth-century city. Unlike Ellen, for whom literacy is an opiate which helps her to accept injustice, Ruth's literacy is a means of speaking out against and changing an oppressive reality. Her literacy is a fluid process of dialogism in which "there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others" (Bakhtin 427).

A similar navigational moment occurs in Frederick Douglass's narrative when Douglass stands on the shore of the Chesapeake Bay and delivers an apostrophe to the sea, speaking out loud to no one but himself and God. In this

scene Douglass momentarily transcends the painful reality of slavery, an experience which provides him with the motivation necessary to physically resist his master Covey. This empowering experience of speaking aloud, detailed in the written narrative, subverts the binary opposition between physical/literary and spiritual/oral conceptions of power by switching back and forth between both of them simultaneously. In this scene Douglass acknowledges that literacy is an instrument of oppression *and* that the experience of orality can provide a measure of resistance to the oppressive nature of literacy. *Writing* about his experience to a white audience indicates that Douglass has not been silenced by the binary oppositions of literacy and orality nor by the hierarchy of master and slave discourse. Instead, he manages to work within and these ideologies in order to gain access to power.

This ability to identify oppressive ideologies and to assess whether or not literacy can help elude such oppression is the essence of metaliteracy. It is against this model of constantly shifting literate activity that this chapter examines the diverging literacies of Ellen Montgomery and Ruth Hall. However, rather than seeing these characters as binary opposites, I will argue that Ellen and Ruth occupy different stages in the developing consciousness of literacy so effectively illustrated by Frederick Douglass. Beyond simply arguing that Ellen's submission through literacy is oppressive and Ruth's resistance is empowering, I conceive of these characters as occupying different stages in a developing consciousness of literacy. This literate development is described as a maturation from literary childhood to motherhood. As in chapter I, Bakhtin's discussion of the individual's struggle with language can again help to understand this process of becoming literate. For Bakhtin, literacy, "is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intention; it is populated--overpopulated--with the

intentions of others. Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one's own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process" (294). Bakhtin describes this process as an "ideological process of becoming," which is characterized by a sharp gap between patriarchy's "authoritative discourse" and the "internally persuasive discourse" in which "the struggle and dialogic interrelationship of these categories of ideological discourse are what usually determine the history of an individual ideological consciousness" (342).

For Ellen, the authoritative discourse of Christianity wins out in the struggle and eventually drowns out her own internally persuasive discourse. As Bakhtin explains:

When someone else's ideological discourse is internally persuasive for us . . . [this] is of decisive significance in the evolution of an individual consciousness: consciousness awakens to independent ideological life in a world of alien discourses surrounding it, and from which it cannot initially separate itself; the process of distinguishing between one's own and other's discourse, between one's own and another's thought is activated rather late in development. (345)

If language does *not* begin to work in an independent, experimenting and discriminating way, as is the case with Ellen, this may lead to "a reification of the word (and to a muffling of the dialogism native to it)" (346). In this "process of becoming," Ellen, like Douglass, begins by internalizing patriarchy's ideology of literacy, but while he ultimately separates himself and transforms that authoritative discourse with the internally persuasive voice of slave experience and African spirituality, Ellen's struggle ends in the muffling of dialogism that Bakhtin predicts and a complete internalization of a patriarchal authority which denies physical reality in favor of a transcendent spiritual reality. Given that the experience of mothering others or being mothered provides the model for the kind of dialogic relationship outlined by Bakhtin, the fact that Ellen is motherless and childless throughout the novel may help

explain why she remains at this early stage of literacy development. Because she is an orphan who never matures into an adult with a sense of responsibility for others, because she remains inside the culture of privilege, Ellen's relationship to various levels of authoritative discourse is rather solipsistic. Ruth Hall, a fiercely protective mother and social critic, is forced into a marginal position where she learns to master and engage in the dialogism which is central to the development of metaliteracy.

Bakhtin characterizes an individual's relationship with language as a struggle. Ellen Montgomery's version of that struggle is a form of discipline in which she is trained to reify many master discourses with no intrusion from her own internally persuasive discourse. For example, by the end of *The Wide, Wide, World*, Ellen Montgomery is highly literate on an *academic* level. She speaks several languages, reads histories, solves complex mathematical equations and carries on conversations with some of Europe's finest minds. At the same time, her religious literacy, another authoritative discourse, locks her into a freeze frame in terms of personal development. Literacy masters her, by dissuading her from a creative and productive interaction with the word. For Ellen, the practice of religious literacy is not a process of becoming, but of repeatedly denying the self; it is not a process of development, but one of indoctrination which trains Ellen to reject any instinctual capacity for critical literateness and its potential for providing personal power and/or overcoming injustice. Ultimately, Ellen's literacy evolves into a process of internalizing the script plotted for her by her 'brother' and husband John Humphreys.<sup>2</sup> John's word becomes synonymous with the word of God, Ellen's ultimate authoritative discourse. It is "the word of the father [which] can be profaned . . . [which] must not be taken in vain" (Bakhtin 342).

Ellen's primary literate activity is reading the Bible and she mainly does that in order to help her quell what she has been told is a "fiery temper." When she does write, mostly letters to her mother, it is frequently to help remind herself to remain obedient. For example, after being separated from her beloved mother, Ellen is forced to travel with strangers to the home of her Aunt Fortune. In a state of grief, she quite naturally cries uncontrollably on the long journey. To make matters worse, the Dunscombe family with whom she is traveling, ridicules Ellen. Margaret Dunscombe says (in a loud enough whisper for Ellen to overhear) "Mamma, I wish you could contrive some way to keep her in the cabin--can't you. She looks so odd in that queer sun-bonnet kind of a thing, that anybody would think she had come out of the woods . . . I shouldn't like to have Miss M'Arthur think she belongs to us" (66).

To Ellen these words were like "a thunderbolt had fallen at [her] feet . . . The lightning of passion shot through every vein. And it was not passion only; there was hurt feeling and wounded pride, and the sorrow of which her heart was full enough before, now wakened afresh" (66-67). Ellen retreats from the Dunscombe family into a nook to be completely hidden. "Her heart had almost been bursting with passion and pain, and now the pent-up tempest broke forth with a fury that racked her little frame from head to foot; and the more because she strove to stifle every sound of it as much as possible. It was the bitterest of sorrow, without any softening thought to allay it, and sharpened and made more bitter by mortification and a passionate sense of unkindness and wrong" (67). The language of the text, words like "passion" and "pride," "tempest" and "fury," implies that the child's response to the situation, indications of her internally persuasive discourse, is inappropriate because it is powerful and full of intense emotion. Ellen has been warned by her unfeeling father that expressing her emotions is an act of resistance; *proper* behavior is

submission to circumstance.

When a kind old gentlemen, Mr. Marshman, learns of Ellen's situation, his response is the same as a host of adult characters to Ellen's instinctual reaction to pain and injustice: he teaches her to deny her own sense of wrong and he uses literacy to reinforce that message. Like Ellen's parents before him--who forbade Ellen from crying when she learned of their imminent separation--the man chastens Ellen to humbly submit to the wrongs inflicted upon her. He asks her to "see the love of your Heavenly Father in this trial" (70), reminding her that God makes her suffer for good reason and that she must thank him for this bitter reminder of her sinfulness, which is primarily the sin of loving her mother more than God. In order to train Ellen to be more patient and to recognize her sinful ways, the man pulls a hymn-book out of his pocket and leaves it with Ellen. Ellen struggles with the lesson of the hymn, which requires her to deny all feelings of being wronged and of sorrow. Later, the man takes out his own Bible and reads from it to Ellen, reminding her to try and act kindly toward her transgressors. After several more hours of "studying and turning over" the hymn-book, Ellen resolves to "try to obey Christ henceforth" (78), which means forgiving trespassers like Margaret Dunscombe and letting go of her sense of being wronged.

In this and countless other scenes of reading throughout the novel, literacy becomes the site of struggle for Ellen between her own interpretations of right and wrong and a religious doctrine which teaches her to deny them in favor of external figures of authority, many of whom are unfair and even cruel to the child. In this regard, Ellen's relationships with 'sympathetic' adults center around their providing the 'right' texts and the 'right' interpretation of events and in Ellen denying her own powers of interpretation. Ellen is aware of (and grateful for) this pattern of deferring to outside authority, both human and

textual, when she explains that in the process of reading the Bible, she often likes to “recall what [her friend] Alice had said at this and the other place and [her husband] John and Mr. Marshman and before them her mother” (360-361). This pattern of complete submission to outside authority, is crystallized in a moment early in the novel when Ellen says to her mother:

I trust every word you say--entirely--I know nothing could be truer; if you were to tell me black is white mamma, I should think my eyes had been mistaken. Then everything you tell or advise me to do, I know is right, perfectly. . . . And I am glad to think I belong to you, and you have the management of me entirely, and I needn't manage myself because I know I can't. (18)

Even though this moment is between mother and child, in many ways the dynamics of Ellen's blind obedience--“I should think my eyes had been mistaken”--echo the submission expected of slaves by their masters. As Frederick Douglass repeatedly indicates in his narrative, one of the chief dangers of slavery is its capacity to corrupt language to the point that it hides reality. Frederick Douglass's response to this kind of an oppressive situation is to develop a sophisticated metaliteracy that privileges the spirit of the law over the written word of the law. Ellen is in a similar situation, but *her* response is to repeatedly privilege the written word of the law as represented by the adult figures in the novel. Ellen's mother has no intention of endangering Ellen, nor does she believe that she uses language to hide reality. But encouraging this kind of complete submission to outside authority and this sense of ‘belonging’ to another person does present some dangers for Ellen when she loses her mother and enters into the wide, wide world because Ellen is still a child with little authority of her own, and none of the people she meets encourage Ellen to trust her own internally persuasive discourse.<sup>3</sup>

Ellen is content to let her mother be her pilot and to treat Mrs. Montgomery's every word as “gospel” (158) because the love she receives from

her mother ensures her protection. Jane Tompkins argues that this novel therefore “bypass[es] worldly authority, ultimately producing a feminist theology in which the godhead is refashioned into an image of maternal authority” (163). Tompkins also claims that the novel defines the mother “as the channel of God’s grace, the medium through which he becomes known to mankind, locat[ing] the effective force of divinity in this world to women” (165). Yet Ellen’s mother is gone before the end of the sixth chapter of the novel. And Ellen’s real struggles begin when mother and daughter are separated and Ellen is thus forced to look elsewhere for interpretive authority, unaware that maternal authority differs considerably from other forms of authority. Maternal authority recognizes the existence of the child and understands that the authoritative discourse of the mother may conflict with other authoritative discourses. The mother privileges her own internally persuasive discourse over others while also encouraging the child to develop her own internally persuasive discourse. Tompkins wants to lump together all of Ellen’s spiritual mentors as images of maternal authority, when in fact the authority they represent differs considerably from Mrs. Montgomery’s. Ellen is an orphan and the loss of her mother drastically changes the nature of her religious education.

Ellen and her mother believe that with the right ‘tools of literacy’ Ellen will be able to remain obedient in her mother’s absence, which is why Mrs. Montgomery sells a precious heirloom ring and risks her frail health in order to venture out to buy her daughter a Bible and a writing desk before they are separated. The most intimate moments between mother and child center around the purchase of these accouterments of literacy. Ellen is entranced by all the inks and pads and sealing waxes and the beautiful Bibles, but Mrs. Montgomery warns Ellen that the gifts should “serve as reminders for you if you are ever tempted to forget my lessons. If you fail to send letters or if those



letters you send are not what they should be, I think the desk will cry shame upon you. And if you every go an hour with a hole in your stocking, or a tear in your dress, or a string off your petticoat, I hope the sight of that work-box will make you blush" (37). Like Frederick Douglass's root, which brings him into contact with his African spirituality, these implements have the power to reconnect Ellen to her mother. Literacy is thus a kind of substitute maternal authority in Mrs. Montgomery's absence.<sup>4</sup>

Rather than being trained to differentiate between maternal authority and other authoritative discourses, to develop a critical literacy to guide her in the world, Ellen is taught to substitute the uninterpreted word of God for the word of her mother. She fails to develop even the slightest bit of critical judgement, but instead turns to the Bible in her mother's absence to teach her what is "black" and "white." Literacy becomes a kind of surrogate parent for Ellen. But this is an uncritical literacy. Reading becomes a process of obedience training, of submission to textual, rather than maternal authority. Slave catechisms functioned in the same manner, training slaves to believe that behind the authority of the master lay the authority of God himself.

Once her mother has gone, Ellen works hard to recreate a kind of catechismic training in the many scenes of reading and writing at the home of her new guardian, her aunt, Miss Fortune. Ellen's acts of reading are generally isolating and consumptive, not the social, productive activities they had been with her mother. When Ellen is scolded or ridiculed by her aunt, the child "used to get alone when she could, to read a verse, if no more, of her Bible, and pray; she could forgive . . . more easily then" (319). Ellen either reads a religious text or writes a letter to her mother in an attempt to substitute for her mother's loss and help her accept aunt Fortune's insensitivity. Even when Ellen reads non-religious texts for pleasure, the experience is repeatedly described as a

“loss of self.” For example, “Whenever she found herself within the leaves of a book, she had certainly lost herself” (329). For Ellen, the notion of being “lost in a book” (329) resonates beyond the traditional sense of an enjoyable escape from reality. Reading and writing are truly processes of defining Ellen’s reality, of losing her own sense of self and of right and wrong, and substituting the sense of self dictated by the doctrine of the text--which is quite different from the sense of self developed in Ellen’s conversations with her mother. As I will discuss later, Ellen’s intense faith in the written word makes her choice of reading materials a very serious matter, which is why she also needs a censor to pick and choose what is appropriate material for her to read.

Since Ellen has been taught to value literacy and to associate it with authority, she is surprised and confused by her aunt Fortune’s distrust of literacy and her assessment of books as superfluous. In fact, many of Ellen’s conflicts with Miss Fortune center primarily around issues of literacy and religion. An obsessively practical woman, aunt Fortune is anti-literate in the sense that she does not see reading and writing as having any value in the day-to-day operations of running a farm. “It doesn’t do for women to be bookworms” (140), Fortune says to Ellen. Aunt Fortune goes on to explain that literacy is a worthless privilege of class and that educated women like Mrs. Montgomery are snobs who feel themselves superior to working-class women like aunt Fortune. So when Ellen arrives at the farm, she is horrified to learn that her aunt will not assume the role of her literacy “pilot.” Instead, she denies Ellen the chance to go to school and frequently keeps Ellen so busy with housework that she has no time for her beloved reading.

Since Ellen can already read and write, aunt Fortune considers that enough learning. But Ellen believes there is more than elementary literacy: “Read and write and cipher?” she says to Fortune, “that’s only the beginning.”

But even though Ellen expresses a deep desire to master more academic discourses, that desire for learning is still intimately connected with a need to submit to maternal authority. “I am learning nothing . . . and what will mamma say?” (141). Ellen wants to learn because her mother has told her that it is the proper thing to do and she is dismayed that aunt Fortune would force her to disobey her mother: “I am not studying and improving myself . . . mamma will be disappointed when she comes back and I meant to please her so much” (140). Here Ellen experiences a conflict between two opposing authorities, her mother and her aunt, a situation which an ethic of submission fails to account for.

For aunt Fortune, “actions speak louder than words” (178) and the only important learning Ellen needs is the physical labor of cooking and cleaning. In aunt Fortune’s world, words are not necessarily connected to reality. In fact, like Frederick Douglass, who understands the potential for language to be manipulative, Miss Fortune believes that words *hide* the truth, which is why she is suspicious of Ellen’s earnest reading of the Bible and her words of repentance when seeking forgiveness. “It’s easy talking; I’d rather have acting. I’d rather see people mend their ways then stand and make speeches about them. Being sorry don’t help the matter much” (178). For Ellen, it has always been the other way around in the sense that words *create* her reality and dictate her actions. In essence, the two characters have a fundamental difference in their understanding of language. For Fortune, truth and reality exist independent of language and literacy is suspect because it has the capacity to distort reality and to hide the truth. In Ellen’s understanding, literacy has the power to change reality and to reveal to her the truth of a situation. Because of her abiding faith in literacy and her inability to differentiate among varying levels of master discourse, Ellen cannot

understand why her aunt is always suspicious of her words and constantly seeks to interrupt her reading opportunities.<sup>5</sup>

In an series of controls like those enacted upon Frederick Douglass by his master Hugh Auld, Aunt Fortune seems to understand that she can assert the utmost authority over Ellen by denying her access to literacy, as she does when she withholds Mrs. Montgomery's letters from abroad or when she opens letters addressed to Ellen. Because of Ellen's sense that she has a sole right to her mother's correspondence, in the same way that no one should be denied access to the sacred words of the Bible, Ellen loses control when she finds out that aunt Fortune has opened her letter.

‘This is *my* letter’ she said trembling;-- ‘who opened it?’  
 ‘Who opened it? *I* opened it. I should like to know who has a better right. And I shall open every one that comes to serve you for looking so;-that you may depend upon.’ (146)

Most of the time the many levels of authoritative discourse are in harmony. At this moment, however, Ellen is caught in a web of conflicting authorities. Her internal sense of right and wrong and her training in the sacredness of the maternal bond conflicts with Aunt Fortune's authority and brings Ellen very close to rebellion: losing her temper and asserting her rights to her mother's letter. But the textual authority of the Bible and the lessons of her mother teach her that she must always be submissive to authority and forgive her trespassers. The question Ellen struggles with is how is she supposed to submit to her aunt's authority and subdue her own emotions when the texts which train her to so do are denied to her by that very authority?

These are very similar to conflicts faced by Frederick Douglass in his own literacy narrative. His response to this web of conflicting authorities, as illustrated in the scene in Durgin and Bailey's shipyard, is to alternate between a stance of submission and resistance in order to develop a double-voiced

discourse, a metaliteracy which allows him to manipulate the various ideologies of literacy for his own benefit.

Ellen's response, however, is to seek out other, *more* authoritative discourses which reinforce the ethic of submission. Since aunt Fortune can't fill Mrs. Montgomery's shoes in terms of Ellen's literacy training, Ellen finds a surrogate in Alice Humphreys, a pious neighbor who takes over the role of Ellen's literacy pilot and moral guide. Alice's father and brother are ministers, so she shares a religious philosophy with Mrs. Montgomery. When Ellen meets Alice in the woods, Alice echoes the words of Ellen's mother and of Mr. Marshman and of the Bible, a text which Ellen had neglected since she arrived at her aunt's. Alice takes care to remind Ellen, "You will not forget your Bible and prayer again, Ellen?" (152).

Ellen certainly does not. After her initial meeting with Alice Humphreys, Ellen "drew forth her Bible from its place at the bottom of her trunk; and opening it at hazard she began to read the eighteenth chapter of Matthew. Some of it she did not quite understand; but she paused with pleasure at the fourteenth verse. "That means me," she thought" (157). Ellen constantly seeks Alice's support to understand how to make the words of the Bible a reality:

'Miss Alice, in my reading this morning I came to a verse that speaks about not being forgiven if we do not forgive others; and oh! how it troubles me; for I can't feel that I forgive aunt Fortune; I feel vexed whenever the thought of her comes into my head; and how can I behave right to her while I feel so? But what can I do to set it right?'

'Pray.'

'Dear Miss Alice, I have been praying all this morning that I might forgive Aunt Fortune, but I cannot do it.'

'Then my child, your duty is plain before you. The next thing after doing wrong is to make all the amends in your power; confess your fault, and ask forgiveness, both of God and man. Pride struggles against it,--I see yours does;--but my child 'God resisteth the proud but giveth grace to the humble.' (166)

In addition to resuming the religious training left off by Mrs. Montgomery, Alice Humphreys also assumes the role of Ellen's schoolteacher, tutoring her in arithmetic, Latin and geography. But rather than encouraging in Ellen a critical literacy which might allow the child a way to work around aunt Fortune's unreasonableness in the way that Frederick Douglass used his sophisticated understanding of literacy to outwit his masters, Alice trains Ellen to be obedient and submissive to ever increasing layers of authority, whether they be the commandments of the Bible, the rules of grammar, or the whims of her guardians. She does this through her choice of texts and by instilling a discipline in Ellen's reading practices:

Ellen could light upon many books that would do her mischief. For those, Alice's wish was enough;--she never opened them. Furthermore, Alice insisted that when Ellen had once fairly begun a book she should go through with it; not capriciously leave it for another, nor have half a dozen about at one time. But when Ellen had read it once she commonly wanted to go over it again, and seldom laid it aside until she had sucked the sweetness all out of it. (333)

Literary discipline and censorship become tools to reinforce the qualities of true womanhood, reminding Ellen to be pious, pure, submissive and domestic, though the excerpt quoted above indicates that Ellen's reading also has the potential to create an experience of pleasure which she is warned to control. Consequently, Alice's utmost concern when she asks Ellen to write an essay is not *what* Ellen has to say, but that the *form* be correct. In fact, she eliminates the possibility for Ellen's experience of writing to be anything other than an exercise in good form when she provides Ellen with a topic: "Will you undertake to write me a note of two pages that shall not have one fault of grammar, nor one word spelt wrong, nor any thing in it that is not good English? You may take for a subject the history of this afternoon" (171). Even in Alice's

duty as a preacher in her father's congregation, her own literate acts consist of simply reading the Bible aloud to blind women (a reminder of Ellen's metaphorical blindness) and repeating to them her father's sermons (181-182). She performs no acts of critical interpretation, experiences no pleasure, but instead acts as a conduit for the patriarchal word, reifying it. Overall, correctness--in language and in behavior--is the primary goal of Alice's literacy.

It is evident that Ellen, like Daisy Randolph, has internalized a belief in the salvation afforded by a disciplined religious literacy in her interactions with non-literate individuals in her new home of Thirlwall like the farm hand Mr. Van Brunt and the rebellious young girl Nancy Vawes. Nancy has done nothing but get Ellen into trouble by ransacking her room and nearly drowning Ellen in a brook, but Ellen believes she can 'save' Nancy and make her good through literacy. In a somewhat comical move indicative of Ellen's naivete, Ellen buys Nancy a Bible. When Nancy asks Ellen why she gave her a Bible since she is so bad and since she hates to read, Ellen explains "if you would only read it,--it will make you so happy and good . . . I am not good at all . . . we're none of us good . . . but the Bible will teach us how to be" (333-334). Nancy eggs Ellen on--"come, let's hear, maybe you'll convert me" (361)--as Ellen explains that she "like[s] to read because I want to go to heaven and it tells me how" (361), but Nancy offers an insight about Ellen's literacy that Ellen herself cannot see, that it is an act of discipline imposed upon her by the expectations of others. It is not an act of internal desire. "But what's the use [of going to heaven]?" said Nancy, "you ain't going to die yet, you're too young . . . at any rate, *that ain't reading it because you love it;--it's because you must*" (361) (emphasis added). Unconsciously, Ellen has attempted to assume the role in Nancy's life of those authorities who use literacy as a means of controlling instinctual behavior. Nancy Vawes sees beyond this attempt at restraint and chooses to remain

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might be doing,--that he saw and heard her; and equally sure that if anything were not right she would sooner or later hear of it. But this was a censorship Ellen rather loved than feared. . . . to have seriously displeased him Ellen would have thought the last great evil that could fall upon her in the world" (461). . . . Once Ellen's parents and Alice have died, Ellen completely surrenders to John's authority as brother, father, teacher and, since he is a minister of God, even as the earthly representative of God the Almighty. Thus, while Jane Tompkins argues that the force of divinity in this novel lies in the mother, it is clear in Ellen's experience with John that the force of divinity lies within John's patriarchal authority, not in maternal authority. Ellen lives and breathes in anticipation of his discipline or approval. John reads to Ellen from the Bible and from a copy of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, which frequently supersedes her own reading of the Bible. When he is not present to interpret its meaning for Ellen, John gives Ellen her own copy of the *Pilgrim's Progress*, its margins filled with his interpretive comments to guide her reading:

She found all throughout the book, on the margins or at the bottom of the leaves, in John's beautiful handwriting, a great many notes--simple, short, plain, exactly what was needed to *open the whole book to her* and to make it of the greatest possible use and pleasure . . . How Ellen loved the book and the giver when she found these beautiful notes it is impossible to tell. She counted it her greatest treasure next to her little red Bible. (370) (emphasis added)

Frederick Douglass's experience of literacy was epitomized by his *writing in the spaces left* of his master's copy book, a metaphor for his ability to simultaneously copy and revise the master discourse of slavery. But in this scene, Ellen is prohibited from even *reading in the spaces left* of *The Pilgrim's Progress* because that space has been written upon by John's handwriting. There are no spaces left because his words are written there, further

reinscribing his authority over her. Ellen's reading of John's text thus stands as the metaphor for her own experience of literacy, specifically the fact that there are no spaces left in the text of authority for her to inscribe her own ideology of literacy.<sup>6</sup>

John also sends Ellen "two or three new English periodicals . . . There was not fiction in them either; they were as full of instruction as of interest" (464). John acts as a moral and textual censor for Ellen, overseeing her behavior and deciding what, when and how much is appropriate for Ellen to read:

Mr. John had broken her off from a very engaging book to take her drawing lesson; and as he stooped down to give a touch or two to the piece she was to copy, he said, 'I don't want you to read any more of that, Ellie; it is not a good book for you.' Ellen did not for a moment question that he was right, nor wish to disobey; but she had become very interested and was a good deal annoyed at having such a sudden stop put to her pleasure. (414)

It is not unusual when Ellen is reading for "a hand [to come] between her and the page and quietly [draw] it away" (476). When Ellen discovers two piles of Blackwood's Magazine in the closet, John asks her to leave them unopened (477). When they are separated, John "arranged what books she should read, what studies she should carry on; and directed her that about these matters as well as about others she should keep up a constant communication with him by letter" (484).

John's censorship, his 'righting' of Ellen's reading materials appears to center around the assumption--prevalent in nineteenth-century America--that certain kinds of texts, particularly fictions, were dangerous because they could corrupt the female mind. Historian Barbara Welter explains that according to the literature of the period, women were dangerously addicted to novels (particularly seduction novels which could ruin young girls) and should avoid

them because they interfered with piety, one of the four cardinal virtues of the “true woman.” If a woman must read, proper reading material included history and religious biography, because these genres did not provide dangerous windows of opportunity for the imagination. Of course this is only one of many prescriptive model of reading behavior for women, but it is the one that John Humphreys fully embraces. He seems to believe that women are incapable of differentiating between fiction and reality.

“Read no novels” John demands, to which Ellen replies, “I never do John. I knew you would not like it, and I have taken good care to keep them out of the way” (564). This typical Victorian attitude toward literacy sees the female mind as entirely passive and submissive, a blank slate easily corrupted by written texts. As we have seen, Ellen Montgomery has been trained as this kind of submissive reader.<sup>7</sup> It is ironic that Susan Warner would write a novel that argues against the reading of novels, but that she did so indicates her faith in her reading audience’s critical ability to differentiate her novels from others that might not provide correct moral training--a critical ability that Ellen does not possess. Rather than equip Ellen with the skills to become a resisting reader who can develop her own interpretive authority to be critical of the texts she encounters, John appears to want to keep Ellen in her childish role. Certainly, as a well educated man, John understands that reading need not be an entirely passive affair; he himself exercises his own critical judgment when his “eyes . . . see every weakness in [Ellen’s] composition.” But there are indications that John Humphrey’s censorship of Ellen’s reading and her activities has an added sexual dimension that goes beyond a purely paternal textual authority. He seems aware of the pleasure Ellen gains from reading and his censorship borders on a kind of emotional control dependent upon exacting obedience from Ellen by exerting control over her passions.

In denying her access to fiction, the stuff of sentimentality and romance, John's authority begins to differ considerably from the kind of maternal authority exacted by Mrs. Montgomery. John seems almost suspicious, even jealous of Ellen's reading because her time spent with non-religious texts enacts a kind of intimacy which interferes with and may in fact supersede John's own intimate attachment to Ellen. He literally interrupts her moments of pleasure because he is not a part of them.

For example, John finds Ellen daydreaming, upon which she asks him if it wouldn't be pleasant if there were such things as oracles, so that she could know what was going to happen. John says "no" it is best not to know things other than what the Bible teaches (311), even suggesting that she come to him to inquire about the future. "Just imagine that I am an oracle and come to me with some question . . . you ask me truly and I'll answer you oracularly" (303). It is almost as if John is anxious about Ellen knowing too much, or searching out other sources of authority or pleasure than himself, lest he possibly lose his textual and ultimately sexual control over her.<sup>8</sup>

John's affection for exercising domination over Ellen extends beyond being purely textual. For example, he assumes control over Ellen's 'riding' in the same way that he oversees her 'writing,' taking it upon himself to teach Ellen how to ride and assuming the responsibility of breaking in Ellen's pony Brownie, "to make sure in the first place he knew his lesson" (405). When Ellen meets John's horse, the Black Prince, the exchange is a similar exercise of domination. Ellen asks if the horse is good (exactly what Ellen is trying so hard to be) and John's response is "I hope so . . . if he is not I shall be at pains to make him so" (402). John has a reputation for whipping horses into obedience, which frightens Ellen. When she objects to the whipping of his horse, Alice justifies John's actions, explaining that "[i]t was a clear case of obstinacy. The

horse was resolved to have his own way and not do what his rider required of him. It was necessary that the horse or the man should give up; and as John has no fancy for giving up, he carried his point, partly by management, partly, I confess, by a judicious use of the whip and spur" (377). Ellen's response to this violence is similar to her reaction when her aunt Fortune boxes her ears for disobedience; she is horrified. But like her resigned acceptance of Miss Fortune's punishment, Ellen accepts that John's tyranny is justified. In Alice's words, "It is sometimes necessary to do such things. You do not suppose John would do it cruelly or unnecessarily?" (377). When Ellen has a particularly rebellious spell later on in the novel, John reminds her to "no more lose command of your horse than you would of yourself" (463).<sup>9</sup> He intends to make sure of both.

While Ellen is repeatedly cautioned against exercising her passion and her anger, John himself has a somewhat celebrated reputation for being explosive and potentially violent, which he exercises especially on Ellen's behalf. He gets into a shoving match with a young man who ridicules Ellen, but the young man is warned away from John by another man who explains "you had better not meddle with him . . . I do not know precisely what it takes to rouse John Humphreys but when he *is* roused he seems to me to have strength enough for twice his bone and muscle. I have seen him do curious things once or twice!" (318). Although John appears quiet, the elder man reminds the younger that "gunpowder is pretty quiet stuff as long as it keeps cool" (318).

John's explosive personality comes to Ellen's aid when he saves her from an attack by a Mr. Saunders, who overtakes Ellen riding her pony and proceeds to viciously harass her. John sees Ellen "almost breathless with terror" at her situation and immediately had "dismounted, taken Mr. Saunders

by the collar, and hurled him quite over into the gully at the side of the road, where he lay at full length without stirring" (400-401). This penchant for getting into fights, whipping horses and John's gunpowder-like personality all have sexual overtones, and John's exercise of authority in these scenes seem to undercut his lessons to Ellen about Christian forgiveness and selflessness. In fact, though John's actions are not inconsistent with nineteenth-century notions of proper masculine behavior, even though he is trying to protect Ellen, the very reason that she's so helpless in the first place is because of her efforts to be obedient to him.<sup>10</sup>

The point at which John's exercise of authority ceases to be an adequate substitute for the maternal authority Ellen has lost is when it fails to prepare her for adulthood by teaching her to protect herself. Ellen's passivity and her lack of authority put her into real danger because they keep her in a constant state of childishness despite the fact that she is growing up. But it appears as if this kind of helplessness and the child's breathless, raging fear is exactly what John desires, not only for religious reasons, but also to satisfy his own desire for control. Ellen's dependence gives John license to exercise his desire for domination. Her religious literacy is John's method of training her in submission to authority and John's censorship is the means of exercising that authority over her. Ellen, however, seems unable to differentiate among the many levels of authoritative discourse he represents: paternal authority, religious authority and sexual authority.

Given how adamantly John strives to keep Ellen submissive to textual authority and his anxiety over Ellen knowing too much, it is difficult to understand a problematic scene late in the novel, when John appears to test Ellen's critical literacy, to see if she is, in fact, blind in her acceptance of textual authority. He asks her a series of questions designed to make her question and

to judge texts and situations which she had been taught to submissively accept, essentially asking her to differentiate among various authoritative discourses.

‘Have you finished [the text written by] Nelson yet?’

‘Oh yes! . . . Oh, I like it very much! I am going all over it again though. I like Nelson very much; don’t you?’

‘Yes--as well as I can like a man of very fine qualities without principle.’

‘Was he that?’ said Ellen.

‘Yes, did you not find it out? I am afraid your eyes were blinded by admiration.’

‘Were they!’ said Ellen. ‘I thought he was so very fine, in everything; and I should be sorry to think he was not.’

‘Look over the book again by all means, with a more critical eye; and when you have done so you shall give me your cool estimate of his character.’

‘Oh me!’ said Ellen. ‘Well,--but I don’t know whether I can give you a *cool* estimate of him; --however I’ll try.’

This exchange is followed by another, equally as suspect:

‘How pleasant the moonlight it!’ said Ellen.

‘What makes it pleasant?’

‘What *makes* it pleasant?--I don’t know; I never thought of such a thing. It is *made* to be pleasant.--I can’t tell *why*; can anybody?’

‘The eye loves light for many reasons, but all kinds of light are not equally agreeable. What makes the peculiar charm of this long stream of light across the floor? and the shadowy brightness without?’

‘You must tell.’ said Ellen; ‘I cannot.’ (478)

The question begged in this scene is why does John seem to push Ellen into a position of being critical of the texts she reads when all along he has trained her in textual subservience and rewarded her for her blind adherence to him?

The conversation continues until John provides Ellen with all the ‘right’ answers to the questions he poses as well as a blueprint for his own theory of interpretation. He explains that “from any works we may form some judgment of the mind and character of their author” and, along the same lines, that he

“cannot help forming some notion of a lady’s mind and character from the way she dresses herself.” He reminds Ellen that he can

read love and beauty in a flower because they seem to bring me very near the hand that made them. They are the works of his fingers; and I cannot consider them without being joyfully assured of the glory and loveliness of their Creator. It is written as plainly to me in their delicate painting and sweet breath and curious structure, as in the very pages of the Bible; though no doubt without the Bible I could not read the flowers. (480-481)

John seems to be saying that you can (and should) judge a book by its cover or a woman by her clothing, but that you can understand natural beauty only by knowing the work of God through the Bible. John contradicts himself here, asking Ellen to *question* human textual authority when he first *criticizes* Nelson and then *judges* writers by their texts and women by their clothing, but then he turns around and tells her to *accept* divine textual authority when he says the Bible helps him read the flowers. Furthermore, he asks Ellen to adhere to his own idiosyncratic pattern of making judgments.

Why does John ask Ellen questions designed to make her critical of the texts she reads, and then proceed to tell her that you need only to read the Bible to read truly? Certainly he is not attempting to make Ellen into what Judith Fetterley calls a “resisting reader” though he does seem to want to allow Ellen to see that there are divergent modes of interpretation for heavenly and earthly texts. A plausible analogy for what John is trying to achieve is critic James L. Machor’s discussion of the control that mostly male antebellum reviewers exerted on women’s reading habits. Machor explains that the goal of these critics was to “act as avatars of the dominant culture, which included traditional ideas about women’s status, interests and reading abilities, as well as the assumption that the purpose of reading was to obtain knowledge that facilitated one’s ability to contribute to the prevailing social order” (65). John’s



objective is a similar attempt to “devalue female response and thus insulate [Ellen] further within the confines of [his] patriarchal authority” (69). John’s interpretations, like those of the reviewers, gave an implicit message that his own reactions were to “serve as a master code, a kind of metareader or ‘informed’ reader composed of the interpretive strategies that [he] exercised and that, by implication, [Ellen herself was] to follow” (70). This attempt to instill a selective use of interpretive powers in Ellen indicates that John never really expects her to be an informed reader capable of making her own distinctions as part of the interpretive process. “Coded by gender, the informed reader instead served as a means for marginalizing and disempowering women by excluding them from full participation in an ultimately phallogentric system of reading” (74-75). Such a lesson would assure John of Ellen’s sustained obedience to him when she is again thrown out into the wide, wide, world because it would enable her to follow John’s interpretive strategies in his absence by internalizing them.

But Ellen seems to understand little from this conversation beyond her own inferiority as a reader to John. Her last comment is “How much you see in everything, that I do not see at all” (481) indicating that the effect of the entire exchange was simply for John to reinforce his superiority to Ellen by revealing to her the limitations of her literate activities. Instead of actually learning something about the importance of differentiating among multiple alternative discourse, Ellen is “blinded by admiration” for John and simply adopts his judgments as her own. The exchange did little more than reinforce Ellen’s dependence and make her feel incapable of piloting her own ship when she leaves the shore. This is why when Ellen finds an unexpected stack of letters from her late father, she is thrown into a state of blind confusion.

Nancy Vawes, who has been snooping around in aunt Fortune’s

bedroom, finds the stack of letters addressed to Ellen, which she promptly steals and brings to their rightful owner. The letters, now nearly three years old, indicate that after his wife's death Mr. Montgomery had arranged for Ellen to be adopted by Mrs. Montgomery's family in Scotland. Having made a commitment in Thirlwall to take care of Alice's father after Alice died, Ellen is caught again in a web of conflicting authorities, torn between her promises to the Humphreys and the authority of these written missives which requires her to place herself in the care of strangers. "I have promised Alice; I have promised Mr. Humphreys, I can't be adopted twice. But my father and mother have adopted me--what shall I do?" (490).

Even Ellen can't help feeling that this time, perhaps, aunt Fortune's decision to disrupt the intended path of these letters would have been a preferable outcome to leaving the surroundings she has come to consider her home. And it is ironic that Nancy Vawes, who earlier reminded Ellen that she only reads things because she *must*, not because she wants to, would be the messenger of the very texts that painfully reinforce Ellen's helpless submission to authority, especially since Nancy only brings Ellen the letters because she believes they will make Ellen happy. Unable to decide what to do on her own, Ellen seeks out the elder Mr. Humphreys in John's absence and Nancy's aunt, Mrs. Vawes, for advice on how to respond to the dictates of the letter. In her typical surrender to outside textual authority, Ellen explains to Mr. Humphreys that she will "will do whatever you say I must sir. As the lord pleases" (494) equating his will with the Lord's will. The written text again supersedes Ellen's own internally persuasive discourse and she experiences the same pain she felt upon leaving her home initially and a repeat of the victimization by her father's tyranny when she is sent off to Scotland to the home of her uncle, Mr. Lindsay.

As “ruler of her destiny” (503), Mr. Lindsay requires that Ellen forget her family in America, change her name and drink wine, which Ellen considers a great sin. He expects of Ellen the exact opposite of what she was trained to do in the Humphrey household.

‘Forget that you were American Ellen,--you belong to me;--your name is not Montgomery anymore,--it is Lindsay;--and I will not have you call me ‘uncle’--I am your father;--you are my own little daughter and you must do precisely what I tell you to do. Do you understand me? . . .

Ellen’s tears had been like to burst forth at his words; with great effort she controlled herself and obeyed him.

‘I shall do precisely what he tells me of course,’ she said to herself . . . ‘but there are some things he cannot command; nor I neither; I am glad of that! Forget indeed!’

She could not help loving her uncle; for the lips that kissed her were very kind as well as peremptory; and if the hand that pressed her cheek was, as she felt it was, the hand of power, its touch was also exceedingly fond. And as she was no more inclined to despise his will than he to permit it, the harmony between them was perfect and unbroken. (510)

Unbroken, that is, only until Mr. Lindsay reverses the pattern of censorship Ellen has been subject to in America by prohibiting her from reading religious texts, going so far as to take away her beloved copy of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* because he believes it makes her too sober: “I wish I could make her drink Lethe” (551) Mr. Lindsay claims of Ellen’s religiosity. He does, however, provide Ellen with a beautiful room outfitted with the finest desk and tools of literacy and he also allows her unrestrained access to a library full of novels and magazines as well as the chance to be tutored by M. Muller, a noted man of science, whom Ellen has impressed at a party with her knowledge of French. Despite Mr. Lindsay’s open desire to allow Ellen complete access to secular literacy, Ellen is forced into a situation similar to the one experienced when she arrived at aunt Fortune’s: she wants desperately to be good and to submit to Mr. Lindsay’s authority, but the texts which train her to so do are denied to her

by that very authority. At a time when “her little Bible was extremely precious . . . [and] Ellen had never gone to it with a deeper sense of need” (540), she is punished for her efforts to regain access to it. At this point in the novel, however, Ellen has so fully reified John’s authoritative discourse that it supersedes the word of God. More than the word of God, the word of John has come to fully substitute for her own internally persuasive discourse.

When faced with these conflicting adult authorities Ellen maintains her allegiance to John over Mr. Lindsay. Her own internally persuasive discourse is indistinguishable from the word of God and from John’s authoritative discourse. These three discourses combine in powerful opposition to Mr. Lindsay.

With all of the petting and fondness she had from her new friends, Ellen felt alone. She was petted and fondled as a darling possession--a dear plaything--a thing to be cared for, taught, governed, disposed of with the greatest affection and delight; but John’s was a higher style of kindness, that entered into all her innermost feelings and wants; and his was a higher style of authority too, that reached where theirs could never attain; an authority Ellen always felt it utterly impossible to dispute; it was sure to be exerted on the side of what was right; and she could better have borne hard words from Mr. Lindsay than a glance of her brother’s eye. (538-9)

When Mr. Lindsay requires Ellen to call him ‘father,’ she articulates the confusion caused by this ethic of submission: which father should she submit to? She thinks to herself: “I have called him my father--I have given myself to him . . . but I gave myself to somebody else first--I can’t undo that--and I never will” (520). The Lindsays take away Ellen’s religious texts and move her into her grandmother’s room so that she has no time alone to pray. Instead, they want her to laugh and have fun and enjoy life. But Ellen’s training in America had been too pervasive to overcome.

She thought a great deal on the subject, and came soberly to the conclusion that it was her duty to disobey. ‘I promised John,’ she

said to herself,--I will never break that promise! I'll do anything rather. And besides, if I had not, it is just as much my duty--a duty that no one here has a right to command me again. I'll do what I think right, come what may. (541)

Again, Ellen's conflict is very similar to her encounter with Miss Fortune, whose authority Ellen also initially resisted. But in this instance, Ellen does not fully submit to her uncle's demands because they are less powerful than are the word of John and the law of God. She believes that she is making up her own mind by doing what she thinks is right, but in reality Ellen's religious training has succeeded in erasing her own internally persuasive discourse, or at least it has become indistinguishable from John Humphreys' authoritative discourse. Ellen can no longer distinguish between her own sense of self and John's construction of her.

Ellen's echoes of John's training are especially clear in a conversation she carries on with Mr. Lindsay about Nelson, the writer who John had trained her to be critical of: "I used to like him very much . . . but he wasn't a good man . . . [h]e left his wife; and Lady Hamilton persuaded him to do one or two other very dishonorable things. . . . A man [can't] be truly a great man who is not master of himself" (516). When Mr. Lindsay compliments Ellen on that insight, she explains (entirely unconscious of the contradiction she is uttering) that "it is not mine sir . . . it was told me; I did not find out all that about Nelson myself; I did not see it all the first time I read his life. I thought he was perfect" (516). In fact, none of Ellen's sights or insights really do belong to her since she is never "master of herself" in her life or in her literate acts. All of her comments are derived through submission to her master John Humphrey's teachings.

In the ensuing battle between the two men over whom Ellen "belongs" to, John is ultimately successful. He uses his desire for control to bully his way

into a party the Lindsay's are having in Scotland to regain access to Ellen. When John sees Ellen from a distance, "the expression of her face touched and pleased him greatly; it was precisely what he wished to see . . . there was in all its lines that singular mixture of gravity and sweetness that is never seen but where religion and discipline have done their work well" (559). In an "agony of joy" at being reunited with John, Ellen "wept with all the vehement passion of her childhood, quivering from head to foot with convulsive sobs" (560). The language of the reunion overflows with Ellen's explosive expressions of emotion, but John does not require Ellen to subdue these violent emotives as she had been required in the past at the loss of her mother--because they are expressed on his behalf. As if to cement his control over Ellen, John's hands "quickly imprisoned hers again" (561). Before John leaves Scotland, the two plan for Ellen, when she is old enough "to chose for herself" (561) that she will return to be his wife, since John believes "I think you belong to me more than to anybody" (563). The question of Ellen choosing for herself is never really a question; John has already made the choice for her. Ellen remains in a childlike state, even when she moves from being John's sister to being his future wife; she never really does choose for herself, though John allows her to think that in obeying God she has found the proper husband. Mr. Lindsay will be welcome in their new home in America as he is no longer a threat to John, "since [he has Ellen] fast now" (581).<sup>11</sup>

One of the last things John Humphreys does for his wife in the final chapter of Warner's novel is to set up Ellen's reading room. The centerpiece of that room is an antique *escritoire* that John prepares for Ellen's use. "It was quite a large piece of furniture. John unlocked it and showed and explained to Ellen its beautiful and curious internal arrangements, with its beautiful workmanship and its costly antiques" (582). Given John and Ellen's history

together, and the role that reading has played in their relationship, it is unlikely that Ellen will ever use the *escritoire* to do any writing. Indeed, the immense value and the mysteries of that writing desk seem to symbolize what the act of writing has come to be for Ellen Montgomery, something which she understands as powerful but whose “internal arrangements” she would rather not know about.

This scene in which John provides Ellen with the accoutrements of literacy recapitulates the early scene in the novel when Ellen’s mother provides her with the tools of literacy, signalling that John has come to take the place of Ellen’s mother. The important difference is that for Ellen, writing has been transformed from the intimacy of letter writing between mother and daughter to a rather mysterious activity that Ellen has little interest in.

In fact, throughout the entire novel, relatively few scenes of writing occur, except to illustrate Ellen’s resistance to the act of inscription. For example, in one scene Ellen is approached by Anthony Fox, “a poor Irishman whose uncouth attempts at a letter Ellen had once offered to write out and make straight for him.” But when he returns for Ellen’s help a second time, she resists being his amanuensis:

‘Dear me!--I wonder if there isn’t somebody else he could get to do it for him . . . I think I have had my share. You don’t know what a piece of work it is, to copy one of those scrawls. It takes me ever so long in the first place to find out what he has written and to then to put it so that anyone else can make sense of that--I’ve had about enough of that.’ (462)

Even though helping Anthony with this letter would constitute an act of charity, Ellen resists because she seems to have forgotten the important role that literacy played in maintaining her relationship with her mother. Writing has become very difficult for her because she seems uncomfortable assuming any position of authority. Ellen also seems to sense the potential danger of

putting a writing instrument into her hands, when John gives her a pencil to do some drawing and she “at first felt more inclined to drive her pencil *through* the paper than to make quiet marks upon it” (316). (One can’t help thinking about Susan Warner in the context of that remark, as she continues to make quiet marks upon her own pages.) Ellen senses the physical power of the pen as means of expressing her emotions, and perhaps the symbolic potential it represents for defining herself, which is the exact opposite of the role literacy has played thus far in her life. When Ellen does write, as in the case of Anthony Fox, it is because she is forced to do so by her efforts to be obedient, but Ellen often expresses anxiety about writing, claiming that it is hard, tedious work and worrying she can “write a note . . . without making mistakes” (171). She takes hours with the letter that she does write to her mother abroad and will only “compose herself” at the behest of adult authority. Given her difficulty writing out of a sense of duty, when Ellen *wants* to write something important, like the inscription on the cover of a book she is making for a gift, it is not surprising that she asks John to do it for her, “I want you, if you will be so good . . . to write a little bit for me on something very beautifully” (302).

John, however, doesn’t write much either. His sermons are in shorthand, which Ellen can’t read and when Ellen is sent off to Scotland, he never writes to her, “preferring coming to writing” (562). But John scripts a more permanent narrative using Ellen as his text. He channels Ellen’s religious literacy to reflect his desired narrative, constructing the story that she will live as his wife. Since Ellen is mostly a submissive reader, she is perfectly content to accept the childish plot line that John has authorized for her. In the end Ellen does not “trust [her] own navigation” or really know her own mind, but she trusts John, who, like the pilot untying the mooring line of the ship he prepares



to set sail, has the skill to “[find] the knot of her thoughts and gently [untie] it” (581).

In the final scene of *The Wide, Wide World*, as John Humphreys introduces his new wife Ellen to the “internal arrangements” of her writing desk, he finishes by

opening and showing her how to open the peculiar lock of a certain concealed drawer, well lined with gold and silver pieces and bank bills--‘here, Ellie, you will always find what you want in this kind. I shall never ask you how you spend it--you are a steward, and must give account of your stewardship, but not to me.’  
‘Money!’ said Ellen; ‘what am I to do with it?’

The materiality of all that money hidden deep in the bowels of a valuable writing desk seems out of place among the spiritual obsessions governing Warner’s novel.<sup>12</sup> In fact, the image seems more fitting to the subject of Fanny Fern’s literacy narrative *Ruth Hall*, which ends when the unmarried protagonist Ruth Hall receives a package containing thousands of dollars worth of bank stock, which she has earned through her career as a successful author. The money represents Ruth’s own salvation, but instead of the religious salvation earned by Ellen Montgomery, Ruth uses literacy to gain economic salvation from the tyranny of a cruel family who refuse to provide her with economic assistance and who try to take away her children after the death of her beloved husband Harry Hall. Ruth’s economic salvation has been earned through literacy, by her ability to tell her own story in print, by writing newspaper articles and novels which speak on behalf of the many helpless women victimized by a cultural script which expects women’s complete submission.

Ellen Montgomery rejects the money offered by her husband at the end of *The Wide, Wide World* because she has already achieved salvation through

a religious literacy which has trained her in submission and self denial. Ellen can remain ignorant about economic reality because she is a child with a ministerial protector to steer her ship and because Ellen is more than willing to trade her independence for protective authority. Though it isn't always easy for Ellen to submit, in the end she achieves security by relinquishing herself because she is fortunate enough to be surrounded by a husband who feels responsible for her physical well being.<sup>13</sup>

Ruth Hall, however, is not so fortunate. In fact, while Ellen Montgomery's friends and family are practically tripping over each other to give Ellen their protection, Ruth falls into poverty because everyone slowly backs off from supporting her when she is left destitute after her husband's death. Even though "her father is a man of property, her brother is in prosperous circumstances and her cousin lives in one of the most fashionable squares in the city" (80) everyone is embarrassed by Ruth's financial situation and no one wants to be associated with her. Her father, Mr. Ellet, is a stingy old man who, as "an annual fit of poverty seized him, and an almshouse loomed up in perspective, reduced the wages of his cook . . . and advised Ruth either to teach school or get married" (16) thus relieving him of any financial responsibility. He feels his duty ended when Ruth married and that she is the responsibility of her in-laws, with whom he is engaged in a constant battle over who can afford to support Ruth and her daughters Katy and Nettie. Ruth's brother Hyacinth has just married "a rich, fashionable wife and of course cannot lose caste by associating with Ruth" (82) in her impoverished state. Ruth's friends feel that since she has gotten so far down they can't keep up her acquaintance. They back away from the door of the boarding house Ruth lives in when they "smell the odor of cabbage issuing from the first entry. . . . [They] wouldn't be seen in that vulgar house for a kingdom" (81).

Ruth Hall could have made the same choice as Ellen Montgomery by fulfilling an ethic of submission. And in fact, as a child, Ruth is very much like Ellen. As Susan Harris reminds us, Ruth is presented early in the novel as a “deprived child, who, like Cinderella, is emotionally abused by her family despite her own exemplary qualities. . . . Ruth’s response to this refusal to value or even admit existence is to retreat into silence, to voluntarily isolate herself [as Ellen repeatedly does]. . . . [I]n isolating herself, Ruth tacitly agrees that her female voice should not be heard” (116-117).

Ruth continues to follow the path of submission when she marries Harry Hall, denying her own desires and submitting to the tyranny of her in-laws, Dr. and Mrs. Hall, who were “like two scathed trees dry harsh and uninviting, presenting only rough surfaces to the clinging ivy” (24). Ellen has Miss Fortune, but Ruth has her own misfortune in the characters of Dr. and Mrs. Hall. They identify Ruth’s primary sin as that of “thriftlessness” and the good doctor and his wife play a role in Ruth’s life much like the adults who constantly remind Ellen of her sinfulness. For example, during meals (while Henry was still alive) “the doctor narrated the market prices he paid for each article of food upon the table (24). Mrs. Hall criticizes Ruth’s housekeeping and literacy habits:

‘What have we hear? a book; poetry, I declare! the most frivolous of all reading; all pencil-marked--and here’s something in Ruth’s own handwriting--*that’s* poetry, too: worse and worse. Well, we’ll see how the kitchen of this poetess looks.’ (32)

As Mrs. Hall snoops through Ruth’s house, giving it the white glove test and criticizing Ruth’s frivolous love of flowers she--like John Humphreys--directs Ruth’s reading habits, warning her only to read religious texts:

‘I hope . . . that you don’t read novels and such trash. I have a very select little library, when you feel inclined to read, consisting of a treatise on “The Complaints of Women,” an excellent sermon on Predestination, by our old minister, Dr. Diggs, and Seven

Reasons why John Rogers, the Martyr, must have had *ten* children instead of *nine* (as is *generally* supposed); anytime you stand in need of *rational* reading, come to me;’ [said] the old lady, smoothing a wrinkle in her black silk apron, [as she] took a dignified leave. (21)

To this treatment, Ruth remains submissive. She “kept her wise little mouth shut; moving, amid those discordant elements, as if she were deaf, dumb, and blind” (23). Ruth’s submission to her in-laws, however, indirectly results in the death of her first child, Daisy, when Ruth listens to her physician father-in-law’s advice and delays treatment for the sick child. This is the novel’s signal that while retreat into isolation may be the best course of action for a child, such a submissive course of action will not do for a mother responsible for the protection of her children. Ruth learns that authoritative discourses can in fact be wrong.

When Harry dies, the inadequacy of this ethic of submission is further underscored. Ruth’s father and Harry’s parents do feel constrained by some faint moral responsibility, fretting that “the world will talk about us if nothing is done for her” (66) but they justify their neglect by blaming Ruth for Harry’s financial failings and her subsequent poverty. The Halls are willing to give Ruth some minor support as long as she submits to their constant ridicule, “increased encroachment” (24), and cruel demands, which include handing over her children and severing all connections with the girls: “I have no objection to take Harry’s children and to bring them up in a sensible manner but, in that case, I’ll have none of her interference” claims Mrs. Hall; “then her hands will be free to earn her own living” (66). When Ruth refuses to turn over the children, the Halls “wash [their] hands of her . . . Let her try to support them till she get starved out” (67). Ruth’s father echoes their sentiments at Ruth’s stubborn insistence on keeping her children: “As you make you bed, so lie in it”

(68).

In Jane Tompkins's assessment of the power structure in sentimental novels, she argues that true power is achieved through submission, which she describes as a "self-willed act of conquest of one's own passions" (162). Tompkins claims that Ellen's submissiveness "is not capitulation to external authority, but the mastery of herself, and therefore, paradoxically, an assertion of authority . . . [because] 'submission' becomes 'self-conquest' and doing the will of one's husband or father brings an access to divine power. By conquering herself in the name of the highest possible authority, the dutiful woman merges her own authority with God's" (162). This logic works quite well for Ellen, because in submitting to John Humphreys' authority, she remains in a childlike state and is taken care of, both spiritually and financially. The limitations of this kind of power are obvious though, if we apply the same logic to Ruth Hall, because as a mother, denying her passions means abandoning her children and abdicating her responsibilities as a mother. She tried that course of action once and she ended up losing her only child as a result. For Ellen, the ethic of submission results in a series of spiritual and economic rewards for being a dutiful child. The kind of spiritual power accessible through an ethic of submission, however, would only further victimize a mother who bears sole responsibility for the material well being of her children. And, as Susan Harris explains, such submission while it "may be the sign of an ideal wife . . . also makes her a martyr, a sacrifice to an unjust system--a system that runs counter to God's wishes. . . And those who accept women's silence as acquiescence in this system are themselves in complicity with the forces of oppression" (120).

While Ellen Montgomery (who, as a child is completely unconscious of material and financial responsibility) retreats to her room to read the Bible as

a means of overcoming her urge to rebel, mother Ruth Hall also escapes to her garret, preferring instead to sharpen up her writing pen and “scribble away” (133) as a means of both of working through her feelings and of earning enough money so she can overcome the stifling demands of those with economic power. Both women use literacy as a means of overcoming difficult circumstances; Ellen submits by reading, Ruth rebels by writing. Moreover, Ruth uses her sophisticated critical literacy for as a means of critiquing the entire patriarchal system.

The two primary differences between the power structure in Susan Warner’s novel and the power structure in Fern’s novel, which account for the differing constructions of literacy, is Ruth’s sense of responsibility as a mother and her position of economic marginality. Ruth writes primarily out of a desire to feed her children and while she “scribbled on, [she was] thinking only of bread for her children” (133). She is also willing to make sacrifices, to submit to difficult circumstances and to undergo pain, but Ruth endures for the sake of her children what she would otherwise not be able to endure, including the disapproval of her family, the advantage taken of her by male editors and the physical hardships of writing all night while the girls sleep:

It was a pity that oil was so dear, too, because most of her writing must be done at night, when Nettie’s little prattling voice was hushed . . . Yes it was a pity that good oil was dear, for the cheaper kind crusted so quick on the wick , and Ruth’s eyes, from excessive weeping, had become quite tender, and often painful. . . . Scratch--scratch--scratch, went Ruth’s pen; the dim lamp flickering in the night breeze, while the deep breathing of the little sleepers was the watchword, On! to her throbbing brow and weary fingers. One o’clock--two o’clock--three o’clock--the lamp burns low in the socket. Ruth lays down her pen, and pushing back the hair from her forehead, leans faint and exhausted against the window sill. (125-126)

Despite these adverse gales Ruth never gives up. “She would gladly support

herself, cheerfully toil day and night, if need be, could she only win an independence" (115). Writing does not allow Ruth to escape or transcend difficult circumstances, but provides a way of meeting those circumstances head on. Despite the fact that writing as a means of support is more appropriate to Ruth's condition because it can be done at home in the domestic setting, the physical nature of Ruth's literacy is indicative of the fact that writing is labor, it is a means of economic production which makes her a participant in the masculine public sphere.

Moreover, to further connect her literacy to her identity as a mother, Ruth frequently likens the labor of childbirth to the creation of a text. When her first daughter Daisy is born, Ruth rejoices as the child is "another outlet for thy womanly heart; a mirror, in which thy smiles and tears shall be reflected back; a fair page, on which thou, God-commissioned, mayest write what thou wilt" (24). Her relationship to the babe is described as one in which "trembling fingers must inscribe, indelibly, on that blank page, characters to be read by the light of eternity" (29). So, while writing is a means of making a living to support her children, it is also a means of self-expression and of self-creation, as is the act of mothering and the domestic artistry Ruth so clearly enjoys. In addition, Fanny Fern's other writings also make clear that for women, writing is a natural outlet for the soul. In answer to the question "Why do women write?" she responds:

Because they can't help it . . . Why does a bird carol? There is that in such a soul that will not be penned up,--that must find voice and expression; a heaven-kindled spark, that is unquenchable; an earnest, soaring spirit, whose wings cannot be earth-clipped. (quoted in Warren 215)

Once Ruth Hall decides that she might write for the public, she plans to send her articles to her brother, Hyacinth Ellet, who is a prosperous editor at

the Irving Magazine. She assumes that he

surely would not refuse *her* when in almost every number of his magazine he was announcing some new contributor or if *he* could not employ her *himself*, he surely would be brotherly enough to point out to her some one of the many avenues so accessible to a man of extensive newspaperial and literary acquaintance. . . . Ruth was quite sure she could write as well as some of his correspondents, whom he had praised with no niggardly pen. She would prepare samples to send immediately, announcing her intention, and offering them for his acceptance. (115)

But Hyacinth, the “mincing, conceited, tip-toeing, be-curved, be-perfumed popinjay . . . who wears fancy neck ties, a seal ring on his little finger, and changes his coat and vest a dozen times a day” (71) responds to Ruth by claiming she has no talent as a writer. Unlike John Humphreys, who does whatever he can to protect Ellen, Hyacinth does not feel any sense of Christian charity for his sister, advising her instead to “seek some *unobtrusive* employment” (116).

Ruth’s response to being brushed off by her dandy of a brother is not the kind of further submission typical of Ellen Montgomery. Her reality is much more threatening: “I have tried the unobtrusive employment . . . the wages are six cents a day, Hyacinth” (116). Unlike Ellen Montgomery, who lives and breathes by the word of her dear “brother” John, Ruth ignores her brother’s advice because she has little mouths to feed and injustices against women to chronicle. In fact her anger at Hyacinth’s rejection fuels her determination to write:

‘I *can* do it, I *feel* it, I *will* do it,’ and she closed her lips firmly; ‘but there will be a desperate struggle first,’ and she clasped her hands over her heart as if it had already commenced; ‘there will be scant meals, sleepless nights and weary days, and a throbbing brow, and an aching heart; there will be the chilling tone, the rude repulse, there will be ten backward steps to one forward. *Pride* must sleep! but--’ and Ruth glanced at her her children--‘it shall be *done*. They shall be proud of their mother. *Hyacinth shall yet be proud to claim his sister.*’ (116)



With the same kind of determination which Ellen sets out to subdue her childlike impulses, Ruth sets out to pursue her maternal impulse through acts of literacy. Moreover, in the exchange with Hyacinth, we can see that Ruth's path toward literary success and her efforts toward economic independence begin to mushroom into a more than a strictly individual and personal undertaking. In fact, Ruth's act of writing and the stories she tells represent another, more public kind of mothering because they attempt to address the difficulties of all women subject to the slavery of "six cents a day" and the tyranny of a patriarchal system which frowns upon any act of self assertion by women--including writing--even if that act of assertion is a necessary means of survival. Ruth's literacy thus becomes a political act of representation in much the same way that Frederick Douglass's narratives were written to give voice to the millions of his brothers and sisters silenced by slavery. She sees that the authoritative discourse of patriarchy oppresses women.

Moving out of the closet--where Jane Tompkins claims all the important activities of the sentimental novel occur--Fern's novel devotes a significant portion of its pages to revealing the economic enslavement single women are subjected to when forced to earn their own living in the nineteenth-century city. The jobs available to women, mostly as seamstresses or washerwomen, pay barely enough for room and board and if a woman has children, she cannot leave the care of them since she is so often alone. Ruth's literary observations paint a clear picture of the economic hardship. She sees a "pale faced woman, with a handkerchief round her aching face, bent over a steaming wash-tub" and "a decrepit old woman, feebly trying to soothe in her palsied arm the wailings of a poor sick child" (90). She reminds us of "a young girl [who] sat

from dawn til dark, scarcely lifting that palled face and weary eyes, stitching and thinking, thinking and stitching. God help her!" (90). From her room in a run-down boarding house, Ruth can see "windows . . . full of pale, anxious, care-worn faces--never a laugh, never a song--but instead ribald curses, and the cries of neglected, half-fed children. . . .[It was] a ragged procession of bare-footed women and children" (90) whose experience Ruth knows firsthand as she rations her food among herself and her daughters.

Ruth also notices an elegant looking apartment in the same neighborhood with carriages frequently rolling up to the door and men hanging about. Through the window Ruth sees the face of a young and fair woman "never without the strain that the bitterest tear may fail to wash away. [Ruth] knew how it could be, when every door of hope seemed shut, by those who make long prayers and wrap themselves up in morality as with a garment and cry with closed purses to averted faces" (91). In a direct attack on those who use religion and morality as means of teaching women to submit, Fern sympathetically brings the plight of the prostitute to life in her story because she knows that she, like Ruth, is enslaved by an economic system which provides no other means of survival. Meanwhile, Ruth has her own hands full with a pair of lecherous men who rejoice at her hard circumstances and plan to cozy up to Katy and Nettie, since that will make it easier for one of them to get into Ruth's good graces.

Ruth must also do battle with authoritative discourse of the business world. She must learn the language of the sleazy men who run the editorial offices of the magazines she hopes to be published in. As she enters into the offices of the *Daily Type*, Ruth "found herself in the midst of a group of smokers, who, in slippered feet, and with heels higher than their heads, were whiffing and laughing amid pauses of conversation, most uproariously. Ruth's

face crimsoned as heels and cigars remained, in *status quo*, and her glance was met by rude stares" (120). Day after day Ruth is met with uncomfortable circumstances and repeated rejections until her purse is empty and she is forced to send Katy off to live with Dr. and Mrs. Hall in a prison-house where every book was put under lock and key (139) and where Mrs. Hall, in Katy's words, "burned up a a story book mamma brought me and tore up a letter which mamma printed on big capital letters on a piece of paper for me to read when I was lonesome" (197).

With sustained effort, Ruth's manuscript is finally accepted at The Standard, though she must wait weeks until publication day to be paid. "Could she hold out to work so hard, and fare so rigidly? for often there was only a crust left at night; but God be thanked, she could now earn that crust!" (125). When she finally sees her words in print, Ruth realizes that her own literate acts enable her to rewrite the oppressive discourse of patriarchy. She is on the road to supporting herself. She soon gains a loyal audience; her newspaper articles are copied in many papers, and her pseudonym, 'Floy', becomes well known among readers, though she still doesn't make enough money to regain custody of Katy, since her editors don't pay Ruth fairly for her work. With the help of a kind editor from New York who recognizes her legitimate value, however, Ruth puts a deal together to publish a collection of her newspaper articles as a book, which she sees as her hope for complete economic independence:

Publication day came at last. There was *the* book. Ruth's book! Oh, how few of its readers, if it were fortunate to find readers, would know how much of her own heart's history was laid bare there. Yes, there was the book. She could recall the circumstances under which each separate article was written. Little shoeless feet were covered with the proceeds of this; a little medicine or a warmer shawl was bought with that. This was written, faint and fasting, late into the long night, that composed while walking warily to or from the offices where she was

employed. One was written with little Nettie sleeping in her lap; another still, a mirthful, merry piece, as an escape valve for a wretched heartache. Each had its own little history. Each would serve, in after days, for a land-mark to some thorny path of by-gone trouble. Oh, if the sun of prosperity, after all, should gild these rugged paths! Some virtues, many faults--the book had--but God speed it, for little Katy's sake. (175)

Ruth has decided to retain copyright privileges and be paid with a percentage of the book's sales rather than take a lump sum in advance. While this means she must wait longer for payment and thus wait longer to be economically secure enough to retrieve her beloved Katy, Ruth makes the decision of a wise businesswoman, and takes the percentage. Her risk pays off, the book is wildly popular and provides Ruth with enough money that she can turn the tables on her stingy relatives, retrieve Katy from the grasp of Dr. and Mrs. Hall and "wash her hands" of them forever.

With "her hands free to earn her own living" Ruth has used her literacy to achieve economic independence, but her trials are far from over. Despite the fact that Ruth writes under a pseudonym to protect her identity and that writing is an activity deemed more "appropriate" to her condition because it can be done in the privacy of the domestic setting, her writing is an act of self-assertion in a culture which expects submission from women. The contents of Ruth's articles are a potential embarrassment to the family who deserted her because they chronicle her experiences in extreme poverty. Indeed, Hyacinth reads his sister's articles "with marked dissatisfaction and uneasiness" and begs her "to desist from scribbling and seek some other employment. . . . Ruth listened . . . with a bitter smile and kept on writing" (134). No doubt this 'Floy' was just the kind of female writer who John Humphrey's censorship was aimed at keeping from Ellen, since 'Floy' was well known to have "the courage to call things by their right names and the independence to express herself boldly on

subjects which to the timid and clique-serving were tabooed" (133).

It would, however, be inaccurate to claim that Ruth Hall's career as a writer is a completely overt act of rebellion against her culture's values, since the impetus for her writing is her responsibility as a mother and her desire to change a system that victimizes all women. Thus, even though her writing empowers her, she still manages to fulfill the pious role of the social script of the times, which dictates that all of women's activities should be guided by altruistic motives. "If an woman enter into the field of authorship" advised an editorial in the Springfield Republican in 1864, "let her do it always in the spirit which seeks for other rewards than the world can give; let her feel the mission . . . is to elevate and bless humanity; that she always speaks for the right, the true, the good" (quoted in Dobson 18). Ruth's writing is partially an act of self-abnegation in that she puts the needs of her children and of other women before her own concerns, though it does provide her with the economic power to become independent of her in-laws. For Ruth Hall, literacy is both personal and political because, like Frederick Douglass, she writes out of her own experience of hardship with a sincere desire to change a system which subjects all women to the tyranny of gender and economics.<sup>14</sup>

The rhetorical style of the novel itself reflects this double-voicedness. As Susan Harris details in her study of *Ruth Hall*, Fanny Fern masterfully combines sentimental imagery and rhetoric with an aggressive manipulation of the values of true womanhood.

Brimming with sentimental rhetoric, the narrative voice is also frequently undercut by a judicious use of humor and a sarcasm which subverts the values of sentimentality and true womanhood at the very same time that it appears to uphold them. This quality of double-voicedness, of simultaneous acceptance and subversion of defined standards for female behavior, provided Ruth Hall with a form through which to speak which appeared to adhere to the ethic of the sentimental novel,

without being enslaved by the voice of propriety. According to Harris, this play of two voices in the novel allows us to see a writer who is “consciously manipulating writing conventions. The frequency of double-direction occurring in the midst of the sentimental mode in *Ruth Hall* suggests [that] . . . from its inception the text embodies radical doubt’s about “women’s power,” its awakening and its manner of defining and limiting a girl’s life” (119). Instead, this novel posits economic power as the true alternative to sentimental power, as the only way to become not a true, but a new woman. Metaliteracy--the ability to identify and control various levels of authoritative discourse--provides access to that economic power. Ruth Hall’s literacy enabled her to construct her own story and rewrite the narrative of her own life, steering her ship into the port of independence despite the oppressive winds of her times.<sup>15</sup>

I have made frequent reference in this chapter to the fact that the differences between Ellen Montgomery’s literacy and Ruth Hall’s literacy can be explained in part by the fact that Ellen remains a child and Ruth matures into a mother and because of the fact that Ellen’s financial privileges never require that she struggle in any physical manner and never step outside her circle of privilege. As I have explained, Ellen Montgomery’s childlike identity is constructed as a primarily spiritual one and her acts of literacy are efforts to help her achieve a spiritual transcendence and a repeated denial of bodily and economic reality. She does, after all, marry a minister, and even in marriage Ellen remains a child. The characterization of her attachment to John Humphreys is silent on the physical and sexual realities of marriage, focusing instead on the pleasures of spiritual submission.

Like Frederick Douglass’s identity as a slave, Ruth Hall is fully

constructed by her bodily reality, by her identity as a mother and by the harsh economic conditions under which she lived. For her, literacy is the means of resisting and revising the oppression of that economic and bodily reality. This opposition between spirituality and physicality, which I have traced through experiences of literacy, is described in Karen Sanchez-Eppler's study of the role of the body in the relationship between abolition and feminism. For Sanchez-Eppler,

feminist-abolitionist awareness of the need to recognize the links between one's identity and one's body, and of all the difficulties inherent in such a recognition, informs . . . the problems of representation . . . The domestic and sentimental conventions of [sentimental] fiction . . . subscribe to a moral, emotional and fundamentally spiritual code that devalues bodily constraints to focus on the soul. As employed in the service of patriarchal authority, the distinction between body and soul traditionally functioned to increase, not decrease social control over the body. (46)

Sanchez-Eppler's argument is clearly helpful in understanding the fictional narratives themselves, especially in the case of Ellen Montgomery, but when we turn from the experiences of spirituality and physicality within the narratives to explore the relationship of literacy to physicality and spirituality in the lives of the authors themselves, the picture becomes less clear. Consider, for example that Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide, World* was the first bestseller in America, that it was--except perhaps for *Uncle Tom's Cabin*--the most popular novel of the nineteenth century and that it brought Susan Warner widespread fame and financial rewards. Consider also, that the novel was written out of a bodily and economic reality: the virtual bankruptcy of the Warner family. Susan Warner's own acts of authorship thus embrace both spiritual and physical epistemologies, acknowledging both patriarchal and feminist discourses simultaneously. In her public career, Warner did not

embrace an ethic of submission. She understood the power of literacy to counteract economic oppression, even as she created a fictional character whose literacy reinforces the discourse of patriarchy. What Warner's choices as a writer reveal is that she constructed her own literacy in such a way that enabled her to write, and to control her physical and bodily identity, to gain economic independence and assume responsibility for the care of her family, but she did so by being conscious of the assumptions of her society and fulfilling those expectations with her words while her literary actions subverted them. Warner's actions thus replicate those of Frederick Douglass's actions in Durgin and Bailey's shipyard, in which he managed to gain access to literacy and to control his own identity while also fulfilling the demands of an audience who would surely be resistant to such actions.

Fanny Fern was able to do the same in her writing career, to simultaneously reinforce and subvert the values of her culture. Her rhetorical choices, however, were different than those of Warner. Rather than tell a story that enacted a patriarchal ideology, she managed to subvert and call into question such values indirectly, through the rhetorical strategies of humor, sarcasm and parody, and more directly through the overt rebellion inherent in the persona of a mother fighting for altruistic motives. Fern, however, paid harsher penalties for the choices she made. She experienced severe criticism and a fair share of personal alienation as a result of the novel *Ruth Hall* because critics reacted very negatively to the novel's harsh denunciation of the ethics of silence and submission which were so fully embraced in Warner's novel.

In many ways, Fanny Fern's experience as a writer epitomizes the metaphor critic Catherine Gallagher uses to characterize the woman writer, that of the prostitute. According to Gallagher, the professionalization of



authorship turned literacy into an act of production, and the written text into a commodity. Citing the work of Gilbert and Gubar, Gallagher explains that historically writing has been associated with generative paternity. With women writers entering the marketplace in unprecedented numbers, criticisms lodged at women writer like Fanny Fern emerged out of the belief that female authors were disrupting the separate spheres as well as corrupting the capitalist system. Like prostitution, in which the female body is the medium of exchange, women writers are selling themselves. And like prostitution, in which lots of sexual activity occurs without sanctioned reproduction, in the domestic fiction market, monetary exchange occurs but nothing worthwhile ever gets produced. As Gallagher explains: "The activities of authoring, of producing illegitimate income, and of alienating oneself through prostitution seem closely associated with one another in the Victorian period" (43). Ruth Hall experiences this connection firsthand when she becomes economically independent and all her mother in law says to her is "I hope you earned it honestly" (185). Fern herself was accused of being "unfeminine," "unwomanly," and "vulgar" (Warren 139).

Gallagher goes on to explain that

Money may be a sign of sterility and even of outcast status, but it is nevertheless an emblem of liberation from patriarchal authority. The woman in the marketplace is presumably free from the patriarch, both in the sense that she needs the permission and approval of no single man, and in the sense that finding her determination in the nexus of relationships with clients or the public enables her to escape the identity imposed by a father. (46)

Such an assessment fully explains Ellen Montgomery's rejection of the money offered to her at the end of Warner's novel by her husband John Humphreys. It also explains the paradoxical position of the woman writer, who experiences authority in her outcast status. This insight is furthered by Nina Auerbach's

assessment that the fallen woman (i.e. the prostitute) was empowered in that she was transcendent in her debasement.

This notion of finding empowerment or transcendence in a position of marginality follows the same pattern illustrated by Frederick Douglass, who used his ability to speak independent of a white audience as a source of freedom and as the impetus to act to change his reality. Likewise, even though the act of writing frequently subjected Fanny Fern to severe personal criticism, her outcast status also allowed her to transcend and move outside the circle of true womanhood, in much the same way that Douglass's orality allowed him to transcend his circumstances. As Susan Harris explains, the "unacknowledged model for the successful heroine's [and writer's] behavior is the lower-class women, whose status freed her from the gender definitions and restriction of the upper and middle classes. . . . such freedom and consequent self-definition come only in isolation, in the lack of protection by others. These heroines have to learn what it is like to be entirely freed from familial and class protections" (122). Only then could Susan Warner and Fanny Fern shore up their powers of resistance and venture to move back, through literacy, to renegotiate the terms of their relationship with the world and to reconstruct their identities on their own terms. In doing so, each found her audience. Susan Warner's readers were women who strived to remain dependent, to adhere to the virtues of true womanhood. Fanny Fern's readers, on the other hand, "were ordinary people . . . the factory women, the shopgirls, the overworked farm wives, the tired mothers" (Warren 178) who were forced to be independent.

This sense of empowerment in isolation from social mores is epitomized in the image of the chrysalis which begins chapter four. The chrysalis is an organic representation of isolation and rebirth, of spirituality and physicality, of imprisonment and empowerment that Harriet Jacobs uses as a metaphor

for her process of literacy and for her own process of constructing a sense of self. She too finds empowerment in her outcast status, in her lack of protection. Yet Harriet Jacobs's efforts to emerge from the chrysalis, to negotiate a new relationship with her world through acts of literacy are repeatedly complicated by her identity as a slave and as a mother.

## NOTES FOR CHAPTER II

1. For an excellent historical overview of the criticism on American women's fiction, see Susan Harris's Introduction to *19th Century Women's Novels: Interpretive Strategies*. My reading of Susan Warner's novel in this chapter differs considerably from that of Joanne Dobson who focuses on the novel's narrative duplicity, pointing out a "subtext" of "strong repressed anger at enforced feminine powerlessness." For other discussions of Warner's representation of power, see Helen Waite Papashvily, *All the Happy Endings*; Nina Baym, *Woman's Fiction*; and Edward Halsey Foster, *Susan and Anna Warner*; Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*; and David Leverenz's *Manhood in the American Renaissance*.

2. John's voice and the voice of the many adult authorities in the novel, including the discourse of God the father, constitute Bakhtin's "authoritative discourse" which Ellen struggles with throughout. Unlike Frederick Douglass, whose "ideological process of becoming" is a process of learning to integrate the voice of authority with his own "internally persuasive discourse," *The Wide, Wide, World* documents Ellen's struggles to sublimate her own "internally persuasive discourse" in favor of a complete internalization of the "authoritative discourse" of the many authorities she encounters.

3. Moreover, what the adults in the novel call Ellen's "rebellious impulses" are perfectly natural (and I would argue healthy) moments of self expression; they are normal responses for a child to have upon experiencing heartbreak and cruelty. These impulses constitute Bakhtin's notion of "internally persuasive discourse."

4. Richard H. Brodhead explores the relationships in *The Wide, Wide World* in terms of a theory of "disciplinary intimacy," which he defines as discipline achieved through love, primarily maternal affection. As the American middle class redefined itself in the antebellum period, Brodhead explains that this approach to discipline superseded corporal punishment as a means of socialization. Brodhead argues that "disciplinary intimacy" includes the personalization of authority and a "sentimentalization of the disciplinary relation" in which authority is expressed through affection. In this approach, "authentic power [expresses itself] in tenderness, not rigor [and operates] by methods that are silent and imperceptible" (21). For Brodhead, the entire novel dramatizes the ongoing process of Ellen's search for authority and love once she is separated from her mother, and ultimately the "perfect internalization of parental authority" (34).

This very same process of "disciplinary intimacy" is at work on the reader of the novel, as the experience of reading creates a relationship of intimacy and thus obedience. Brodhead explains that in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, the novel itself, as a genre, became "another agent of

discipline through love" (47), an idea which Jane Tompkins also reaches in *Sentimental Designs* when she argues that "the implantation of virtue was the primary goal of nearly everything nineteenth-century Americans read" (157). See *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America*, Chapter 1: "Sparing the Rod: Discipline and Fiction in Antebellum America."

While Tompkins and Brodhead are discussing the experience of nineteenth-century novel readers, their account of the "disciplinary intimacy" of the reading process is also an accurate description of Ellen's reading experiences, through which she learns discipline and obedience.

5. As discussed in the previous chapter, neither of these opposing conceptions of literacy are entirely accurate. As Frederick Douglass's life and narratives illustrate so clearly, many opposing conceptions of literacy function simultaneously. It is only when an individual can alternately move within and outside of the circle of a culture that he or she can see the fluidity of these binary oppositions. Ellen seems stuck "inside the circle," unable to be critical of literacy.

6. My thanks to John Ernest for pointing this connection out to me.

7. In "Gender and Reading" Elizabeth Flynn characterizes the reading process as a confrontation between the self and "other" in which the reader can dominate the text (the dominant pole) or in which the text dominates the reader (the submissive pole). In the Victorian understanding of the reading process, women are incapable of being on the dominant pole, which "is characterized by detachment, observation from distance [in which] the reader imposes a previously established structure on the text and in doing so silences it" (268). Instead, all women readers are assumed to be on the submissive pole, which "is characterized by too much involvement. The reader is entangled in the events of the story and is unable to stand back, to observe with a critical eye" (269). According to James Machor, the widely read *Godey's* ladies magazine echoed this understanding of female literacy, cautioning that "our most accomplished young women are too often weak demented creatures whose imagination has been dazzled and their taste corrupted by the frivolous European novel" (67). The response of Victorians to this weakness in the female reader was not to train the woman to be more critical; the response was to exert control over the text itself, substituting those texts believed to be innocuous.

8. Several critics discuss the relationship between John and Ellen as having sexual overtones. Jane Tompkins explains that while "Ellen's self-immolations are excruciatingly painful, they are also, and for the same reason, titillating. While the tears Ellen sheds on every page are tears of repressed anger, they are also tears of orgasmic release, spilling again and again in situations where she is being psychically stripped. These scenes replicate what Susan Griffin has called the basic pornographic situation, in which one person is robbed by

another of everything that makes him or her a human being and is reduced to the status of an object" (599). Tompkins goes on to explain that John and Ellen's relationship suggests a connection between punishment and sexual pleasure which recalls *The Story of O*.

In *To Kiss the Chastening Rod*, T. M. Goshgarian sees the relationship between Ellen and John in terms of Ellen's incestuous desire. He argues that John does to Ellen essentially what the villainous Saunders does to her: "John too penetrates her, punishes her, works his will on her weakness" (105).

9. Several critics have discussed the connection between John's effort at "righting" Ellen and his control of her "riding" and "writing." Joanne Dobson explains that "though the use of censure and petty humiliation, he, in essence, educates himself a wife, and he does it in much the same way he would break a horse" (231).

Moreover, T.M. Goshgarian connects the relationship between John and Ellen to that which existed between Warner and God, whom the author once claimed actually wrote the novel. "The story of the righting of Ellen doubles as one about the righting of writing. The critics are right to insist on Ellen's spontaneous identification with Ellen's chastened horse: her horse-beater of a "brother" gives her a [riding lesson] in more than one sense of the word. To put it bluntly, he rides her--or more precisely, rides the female animal *in* her. That she 'rather love[s] it' links riding, via righting to (re)writing: Ellen's craving for a riding master all but spells out her author's for a writing master. As the one child-woman loves being overridden by her sensually censorious "brother," so the other longs to be written over by her celestial Father. Warner's magisterial pun, then, conjugates more than the taming of the equine and child-womanly passion: it whispers that textual desire too can only be satiated under 'religions happy reigns'" (112).

10. Joanne Dobson argues that for the true woman, "renunciation of authority is imperative, no alternative exists" (232). She believes that Ellen has internalized John's discipline to the point that it becomes her own. I would argue that Ellen always maintains a distinction between John's external discipline and her own internal sense of right and wrong. She never completely makes the process of censure her own, relying upon him until the end to make her decisions. Moreover, I disagree with Tompkins claim that Ellen has no other choice but to renounce her own authority, since Ruth Hall shows us how literacy can create choices which Ellen rejects.

11. E. Anthony Rotundo, in his study of masculinity in nineteenth-century American, describes a doctrine of "Muscular Christianity" which called for a 'vigorous robust muscular Christianity.' Rotundo explains that "this hardy Jesus with rippling muscles . . . was an enforcer who 'turned again and again on the snarling pack of His pious enemies and made them slink away.'" According to Rotundo, the key to Muscular Christianity "was not the idea of the spirit made flesh, but of the flesh made spirit" (224). This ideal seems to perfectly describe John Humphreys' particular version of manliness. For more

on masculinity in nineteenth-century America, see Rotundo's *American Manhood* and David Leverenz's *Manhood in the American Renaissance*.

12. Jane Tompkins discusses this final chapter as Warner's "reinfantilization" of Ellen, and the author's own fantasy realized, since, in setting Ellen up in a world of riches, Warner gives Ellen "everything she herself wanted and couldn't get." Ellen's paradise is topped off with the powerful drawer of cash at her disposal which is a realization of the luxury and protection Warner dreamed for but never achieved. Tompkins explains that "this dream of wealth and comfort does not jibe with her hard-won resolve to accept the Lord's will. In turning the reward she has invented for Ellen into an elaborate realization of her own desire, Warner only makes a more obvious split" (60) between the selfless message of the novel and her own desire for economic power.

13. This point reveals the primary omission in Tompkins's analysis of Warner's novel, which is that in arguing for Ellen's "power through self-renunciation" Tompkins seems to ignore economic reality. Tompkins argument hinges on the assertion that Ellen has no choice but to give up her authority to those around her. But it ignores the fact that Ellen does have the luxury of choice and she can remain firmly fixated in the spiritual realm only because she is insulated from economic reality.

14. This private/public split is discussed in Mary Kelley's *Private Woman, Public Stage* as well in Bakhtin's notion of double-voiced discourse.

15. For a discussion of the double-voiced discourse in *Ruth Hall*, see Susan Harris's chapter on Fanny Fern in *19th-Century American Women's Novels: Interpretive Strategies*.

### CHAPTER III

#### EMERGING FROM THE CHRYSALIS: *INCIDENTS IN THE LIFE OF A SLAVE GIRL* AS LITERARY METAMORPHIS

If any individual live too much in relations, so that he becomes a stranger to the resources of his own nature, he falls, after a while, into a distraction, or imbecility, from which he can only be cured by a time of isolation, which gives the renovating fountains time to rise.

--Margaret Fuller, "Woman in the Nineteenth Century"

Thank God the bitter cup of slavery is drained of its last dregs.  
There is no more need of hiding places to conceal slave mothers.

--Harriet Jacobs

Black women's autobiographies seem torn between exhibitionism and secrecy, between self-display and self-concealment.

--Elizabeth Fox-Genovese

One of the most insidious experiences of sexual oppression narrated in Harriet Jacobs's 1862 slave narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, hinges on literacy. In the scene which begins chapter VI, "The Jealous Mistress," Dr. Flint attempts to use Linda Brent's ability to read to seduce her. She explains: "One day he caught me teaching myself to write . . . [and he] came to the conclusion that such an accomplishment might help to advance his favorite scheme" (31). Flint writes Linda perverse letters, supposing that literary correspondence would help in his effort to assert sexual control over her. Even though Linda was quite capable of reading--she had been taught to read by her first mistress--she would return the notes to Dr. Flint, claiming that she could not read them. By feigning an inability to read, Linda transforms illiteracy--a state traditionally used to victimize slaves--as a shield to hide behind. In fact, Linda Brent repeatedly feigns ignorance to protect herself from Dr. Flint's sexual advances: "What he could not say in words, he



manifested in signs . . . I let them pass, as if I did not understand what he meant; and many were the curse and threats bestowed upon me for my stupidity" (31). At this moment Linda Brent thus conflates literacy with sexuality, figuring illiteracy as one means of protection against Flint's sexual harassment.

In this important scene, Linda Brent echoes Frederick Douglass's sentiments upon learning to read when he claimed that "learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing . . . In moments of agony, I envied my fellow slaves for their stupidity." Like Douglass, Brent acknowledges the oppressive potential of sexual as well as textual knowledge, when she explains that "the influences of slavery . . . had made [her] prematurely knowing, concerning the evil ways of the world" (55). Her false illiteracy indicates that she understands and thus eludes the violent potential of literacy. By refusing to read Dr. Flint's letters she eviscerates his efforts to conceal his sexual advances in the silence of a written text. He is forced to resort to the more perilous practice of reading his letters aloud or addressing Linda directly, advances she continually fights by seeking the protective company of witnesses. From the beginning of the narrative, Linda is clearly aware of the fact that literacy has both private and public dimensions. She sees it as a potential means of victimization as much as it provides a possible access to power and she repeatedly reconfigures slavery's ideology of literacy, turning its own power against itself. As such, she also refuses to write, to enter into a correspondence with Dr. Flint.

He knew that I could write, though he had failed to make me read his letters; and he was now troubled lest I should exchange letters with another man . . . One morning, as he passed through the hall, to leave the house, he contrived to thrust a note into my hand. I thought I had better read it, and spare myself the vexation of having him read it to me. . . . The next morning I was called to carry a pair of scissors to his room. I laid them on the table, with

the letter beside them. He thought it was my answer [but when] he met me in the street, and ordered me to go stop in his office, he showed me the letter and asked me why I had not answered it. (40-41)

In this letter, Dr. Flint poses the possibility of moving Linda to Louisiana to be his concubine. He expects Linda to write back to him about whether such an arrangement might be agreeable to her. But Linda again refuses because she knows that by responding to him in writing, she would be acknowledging his proposed story as more than a fiction. As Karen Sanchez-Eppler explains, Linda Brent "identifies sexual oppression less with any physical act than with the representation of that act" (95-96). The act of writing to Dr. Flint would acknowledge the intimacy of literary correspondence and Linda refuses to do so because she knows that their relationship--that of master and slave--does not warrant that kind of intimacy. For this reason, she even refuses to use her ability to write back to him as a means of rebelling against his advances. In doing so, Brent manages to subvert the enslaving capacity of literacy: again, her refusal to participate in intimate literate acts initiated by Dr. Flint protects her.

Immediately after the scene in which she refuses to read Dr. Flint's letters, Linda is questioned about his advances by Mrs. Flint. As Linda explains, "she handed me a Bible and said, 'Lay your hand on your heart, kiss this holy book, and swear before God that you tell me the truth.'" In this scene, Linda's act of putting her hand on the Bible represents another form of unspoken textual intimacy, this time invoked by Mrs. Flint in a complicated test of Linda's allegiance. Both women accept this shared, unspoken adherence to the Biblical oath as an act of good faith, which Linda hopes will provide an avenue of protection from Dr. Flint. Through this Christian ideology of literacy, Mrs. Flint uses this oath to God and herself to remove any

concealment between the women; Linda also sees it as an opportunity to do her duty as a Christian and to expose the secrecy so finely cultivated by Dr. Flint. Linda says: "I took the oath and did it with a clear conscience" (33).

If we examine these two scenes side by side, we can see that Dr. Flint and his wife use literacy in a similar manner, but that the ends to which textual intimacy is directed are quite different. In the first, Dr. Flint uses writing as an oppressive kind of forced intimacy, by using the silences of the literate act as a means of self-protection. For him, literacy is used to enact obedience from Linda and thus create his own desired reality. Secrecy is essential to these efforts. For Mrs. Flint, having Linda swear on the Bible dictates that literateness, the act of taking the oath, ensures the revelation of an already established reality. In the first instance, Linda sees the secrecy of reading and writing as oppressive, so she refuses to participate; in the second, the reading of the Bible is invoked, which she sees as potentially protective, because it is communal act of literacy that she hopes will protect her from the oppression of Dr. Flint's private acts by making them public. In these two scenes Brent works simultaneously within and against both the isolating and communal aspects of literacy. As we know, however, Linda Brent's confession succeeds only in further oppressing her, since Mrs. Flint responds to the information by constructing herself as the true victim. The Christian values of charity and forgiveness invoked through the Bible and the female intimacy Linda hopes to gain from confessing to Mrs. Flint are simply manipulated by Mrs. Flint into avenues of further victimization when she embarks on her own pattern of harassment.

When examined in these varying contexts, it becomes increasingly difficult to describe what literacy means for Linda Brent, since for her, literacy is like a kaleidoscope which is constantly refracted in multiple ways depending

on the situation Brent finds herself in. These scenes show us that literacy for Linda Brent is always fully contextualized; an essential part of her experience of literacy involves the capacity to make slight adjustments and shifts in her literate activities depending upon her environment. Literacy can be both protective and oppressive; it can be isolating and it can be an act of community. Linda alternately finds protection and oppression in the isolation of literacy. For example, Dr. Flint cannot continue his efforts at literary intimacy--and sexual oppression--in a public setting; the watchful eye of the community protects Linda. She says, "How often did I rejoice that I lived in a town where all the inhabitants knew each other" (35). At the same time, she sees the limitations of a communal Biblical literacy in the context of slavery when Christianity is manipulated as a justification for further oppression. Moreover, Harriet Jacobs knows that the public act of telling her story is also an act of countering Dr. Flint's version of reality with her own truth. Jacobs tells her readers, "Reader, . . . I am telling you the plain truth" (35).

Unlike Ellen Montgomery, Linda does not have blind faith in a single external authority but instead she learns to differentiate among the varying levels of authority she encounters and to adjust her literate acts accordingly. She understands that both literacy and illiteracy can be isolating and that at different times such isolation can be oppressive or protective. Equally important, she understands that in different circumstances either one might be the needed precursor to more public acts of cultural negotiation. Like Frederick Douglass, who constantly figures writing and talking as a two-pronged instrument of empowerment, the literate experiences of Harriet Jacobs and Linda Brent ultimately reveal that real freedom emerges from the conflation of literateness with a sense of moral responsibility within a supportive community.

This fluid quality of literacy is evident in the focus of critical discussions of Harriet Jacobs's public act of authorship, for in writing to an audience primarily of white women, the complexities of Jacobs's authorship simultaneously replicate Linda Brent's confessions to Mrs. Flint, her struggles with Dr. Flint's oppressive literacy and other, more empowering experiences of literacy as acts of community. Harriet Jacobs's own metaphor for this complex understanding of literacy is the chrysalis. In a letter to her friend Amy Post dated March 1854, Jacobs explains that she is in the process of writing the story of her life as a slave but that she has completed very little of the manuscript because her duties as a nanny and housekeeper leave it "hard to find much time to write [sic] as yet I have not written a page by daylight . . . just now the poor Book is in its Chrysalis state and though I can never make it a butterfly I am satisfied to have it creep among some of the humbler bugs" (238). The chrysalis stage of development is the period of immobility in which the caterpillar isolates and transforms itself; the image deftly captures Jacobs's experience of writing her narrative after her escape from slavery. While working as a domestic servant for Mr. and Mrs. Nathaniel Willis, Jacobs wrote at night under cover of darkness and kept her writing a secret from her employers. Jacobs's choice of the chrysalis metaphor captures important aspects of her writing process, namely the extended period of isolation and secrecy she endured in trying to write her narrative and her eventual reemergence through the communal act of publication.

While Jacobs uses the chrysalis image to describe a stage in the process of writing her "book," her public act of authorship, my discussion of Chapter VI illustrates that the image also captures the shifting patterns of isolation and cultural negotiation enacted in Linda Brent's literate experiences (her movement between secrecy and community) as a character within the

narrative. At the same time, the chrysalis metaphor invokes other experiences of alternating interiority and exteriority which do not always directly involve acts of literacy, but which function similarly, allowing Linda to wrest control of her identity from the institutions of slavery and patriarchy, and to liberate herself. These "chrysalis experiences," as I call them, include the drama of sexuality and motherhood and the physical secrecy Jacobs endured as she hid from her master in the crawl space of her grandmother's storehouse. In these periods, the chrysalis pattern is repeatedly reenacted: Jacobs uses her womblike confinement as a kind of metaphorical incubation, as a time and space of relative autonomy where she can shore up her powers of resistance away from authority's watchful eye. Her chosen confinements--"at once prisons and exits" (32) in the words of Valerie Smith--are ultimately transformative because from them emerge repeated acts of creativity: from her literary isolation she creates a text; from her maternal isolation she creates life; from her physical isolation she creates a free identity. In all three periods of isolation, Harriet Jacobs wrests control of the powers of sexual, economic and literary (re)production denied her by the patriarchal institution of slavery. Through these transformative processes of developing literateness and creativity, Harriet Jacobs eludes persecution and ultimately succeeds in dismantling slavery's hold on her identity.<sup>1</sup>

In her discussion of women's novels of the nineteenth century, Susan Harris claims that many women writers found "freedom and consequent self-definition . . . only in isolation, in the lack of protection by others" (122). In this position of isolation or marginality, such women writers were free from the "gender definitions and restrictions of the middle and upper classes" (122).

Harris is discussing white women writers, but we have seen this freedom illustrated in the previous discussions of literacy narratives in this study. Frederick Douglass finds his most transcendent moments when he isolates himself from the restrictions of slavery and the demands of a white audience on the shores of the Chesapeake Bay; the isolation of poverty enables Ruth Hall to write and gain financial independence; and Ellen Montgomery loses her sense of self because of a stifling overprotection and her inability to separate from John Humphrey's influence.

Most of the criticism on Jacobs's narrative emphasize the exteriority of literacy, that is, the complex process of cultural negotiation involved in publishing her story and constructing a relationship with her audience. It is much more difficult, however, to discuss the isolation and the interiority of the chrysalis experience precisely because of its invisibility. It is within the protective walls of the chrysalis that Jacobs finds relative freedom and succeeds in defining herself despite the restrictions of slavery. The kind of freedom she experiences in these periods does however, require that she eventually move out of the isolation, using the experience of autonomy nurtured there to negotiate a new relationship with the world. Secrecy and isolation can be protective and transformative, but Jacobs's experiences reveal that such isolation must ultimately be balanced by a reemergence and a sense of moral responsibility. As Patrocinio Schweickart says about all acts of feminist criticism, the point of Jacobs's experience is not only to write, but to also change her world through the act of writing.

While empowering, Jacobs's chosen confinements--maternity, physical hiding and literary secrecy--are also periods of intense pain and confusion. In slipping into liminal spaces Jacobs manages to assert her autonomy, but in order to reach these places of marginality, she must repeatedly reject the

demands of the culture she lives in, whether they be the authoritative discourses of patriarchy or motherhood or slavery. Jacobs's experiences reveal that she must retreat from her society because externally-imposed moral codes fail to acknowledge the physical, emotional or spiritual reality of slavery and fail to provide her with the language to discuss her own internal reality. And even though Jacobs maintains her own internal code of morality, she still suffers the pain of alienation when her actions are judged by the prevailing social script, which makes her process of writing about these experiences--to a potentially unsympathetic northern white audience--a troubling experience. Jacobs's triumphs throughout the narrative, her ability to escape bondage and to use literacy as a means of self-preservation, are fraught with fear and doubt; her relative freedom is persistently bittersweet because the isolation she must endure is frequently lonely, painful and defined by silence.

The rest of this chapter will first explore Linda Brent's understanding of literacy as a character within the narrative and then move on in subsequent sections to examine these "chrysalis experiences" in detail. By looking at these chrysalis experiences, I hope to identify continuities between Jacobs's experiences of literacy and the fluidity of other experiences of interiority and exteriority which function--like literacy--to provide access to various levels of freedom. I like to think of the methodology of this chapter as something akin to looking in a three-way mirror, a more manageable version of the kaleidoscope. By focusing directly on one chrysalis experience, literacy, I simultaneously gain a refracted perspective on two other chrysalis patterns in the text--Brent's sexual experiences and her search for identity--which I may have been unable to see otherwise. Likewise, when literacy itself becomes a refracted perspective, seen reflected through Brent's experience of motherhood and her search for a sense of self, our understanding of it deepens considerably.



As the discussion that opened this chapter showed us, in her relationships with Dr. and Mrs. Flint, Linda Brent repeatedly maneuvers among many possibilities for literacy, alternately refusing or using literacy to her benefit. But literacy also existed outside of the master-slave relationship, helping to shape Brent's relationships with other slaves as well as her own religious, moral and cultural identity. Linda's experiences of literacy and sexual oppression with Flint enable her to see the paradoxes of literacy and to understand its capacity to enslave. But many illiterate slaves and illiterate whites didn't possess this ability to contextualize literacy: for them, literacy was believed *always* to embody power. Indeed, the entire institution of slavery is predicated on this mythological power of literacy, which is acknowledged by Brent when she describes the way that illiterate slaves "often asked if I had seen anything in the newspapers about white folks over in the big north, who were trying to get their freedom for them. Some believed that the abolitionists had already made them free, and that it is established by law, but that their masters prevent the law from going through. One woman begged me to get a newspaper and read it over" (45) believing that the slaves had been set free by the Queen of America. In this instance, illiterate slaves believed that what may have been written about them in northern law and/or newspapers held more power than their own physical reality. But as we saw with Frederick Douglass, such blind faith in the literacy myth is primarily held by those with little or no experience of literacy.

This belief in the magical power of literacy is shared by illiterate whites who view the ability to write as an evil in the hands of blacks. Brent explains that illiterate white men, when searching the homes of blacks after Nat Turner's insurrection, seized upon any piece of writing as potential evidence of

a plot to revolt. When they enter Linda's grandmother's house and find a letter, they shout

'We's got 'em! Dis 'ere yaller gal's got letters!'

There was a general rush for the supposed letter, which, upon examination, turned out to be some verses written to me by a friend. . . . When their captain informed [the men] of their contents, they seemed much disappointed. He inquired of me who wrote them. I told him it was one of my friends. 'Can you read them?' he asked. When I told him I could, he swore, and raved, and tore the paper into bits. 'Bring me all your letters!' said he in a commanding tone. I told him I had none . . . Seeing I did not move to obey him, his . . . tone changed to oaths and threats. 'Who writes to you? half free niggers?' inquired he. I replied, 'O, no; most of my letters are from white people. Some request me to burn them after they are read, and some I destroy without reading.'

(65-66)

Linda's response to these accusations, combined with the fact that letters have been seen as metaphors for woman's sexuality, subtly reminds us that the letters she "burns" or "destroys without reading" are those written to her by Dr. Flint. In this scene she conflates the opposing ideologies of literacy at work in slave culture to undermine the authority of the white men. On the one hand, the white men believe that literacy in the hands of slaves is a dangerous tool, capable of helping to incite insurrections. On the other hand Linda's response indicates that slave literacy is equally as dangerous in the hands of slaveholders when used as a means of indoctrination and further oppression. Her refusal to read Dr. Flint's letters but her desire to keep the verses written by her friend signals that she has a control over literacy, an ability to use literacy with a critical consciousness, that illiterates do not have. She embraces the intimacy of literacy with her friends, but rejects it with Dr. Flint. Aware of this, Brent responds to threats about her letters by refusing to acknowledge the white men's fears about the dangers literacy poses to them, positing instead the way in which literacy was dangerous to the slave.

This same dichotomy between literacy as a means of oppression or empowerment underscored debates about slaves' religious literacy. The conflict centered on religious literacy and slaves' access to the Bible. Benevolent societies embarked on a "Bibles for Slaves" campaign, arguing that all slaves should have Bibles and that a literate population was necessary for a Christian and democratic nation. These societies, bolstered by Northern abolitionists, argued that the Bible had the potential to unify and reform and thus guarantee social order in troubled times. Opponents believed that such demands interfered with slaveholder rights; they feared that literate slaves could potentially incite slave revolts (Cornelius 125-141). In the chapter "The Church and Slavery" Linda Brent teaches a fellow slave to read, presenting a scene which indirectly refutes the claim that literacy was dangerous in the hands of blacks. She portrays her side of the debate by describing "good old Uncle Fred," a man reminiscent of Uncle Tom, "whose piety and childlike trust in God was beautiful to witness" (73). Certainly no threatening force, he "had a most earnest desire to learn to read. He thought he should know how to serve God better if he could only read the Bible. He came to me and begged me to teach him. . . . I asked him if he didn't know it was contrary to law; and that slaves were whipped and imprisoned for teaching each other to read. This brought tears to his eyes" (73). Brent's sentimental depiction of this instance of slave literacy, couched in religious rhetoric, enacts an understanding of religious literacy very similar to that of Susan Warner's. At the same time, such a depiction resists the sentimental ethic of submission because it reveals to her readers the errors of laws against slave literacy and justifies Brent's decision to teach him anyway:

I selected a Quiet nook where no intruder was likely to penetrate, and there I taught him his A, B, C. As soon as he could spell in two syllables, he wanted to spell out words in the Bible. . . . After

spelling out a few words, he paused, and said 'Honey, it 'pears when I can read dis good book I shall be nearer to God. White man is got all de sense. He can learn easy. It ain't easy for old black man like me. I only wants to read his book, dat I may know how to live; den I hab no fear 'bout dying.' . . . There are thousands, who, like good uncle Fred, are thirsting for the water of life; but the law forbids it and the churches uphold it. They send the Bible to heathens abroad, and neglect the heathen at home. (73)

In this scene--an example of the literary confinement previously described--"good uncle Fred" wants to be literate as a means of making him a better Christian. Brent is fully aware that literacy can be used as a means of resistance, but by using her literacy to tell the story of a passive slave whose only desire for attaining literacy is to become even more submissive, she is indirectly justifying her own act of literacy, while simultaneously revealing the inherent paradoxes in slavery's understanding of literacy. In this scene she is reinforcing the value of religious literacy as she argues against those who believe literate slaves will rebel. In many ways this scene is reminiscent of Ellen Montgomery's earnest desire to teach Mr. Van Brunt to reach the Bible, but the important difference is Linda Brent's simultaneous awareness of the harmful potential of Bible literacy, a knowledge which Ellen does not share.

The interpenetration of religious literacy and sexuality is evident when Brent complicates this message about the value of slave literacy, using her knowledge of the Bible to resist Dr. Flint's invitations to become his mistress. He explains that

'You can do what I require, and if you are faithful to me, you will be as virtuous as my wife, he replied.

I answered that the Bible did not say so.

His voice became hoarse with rage. 'How dare you preach to me about your infernal Bible!' he exclaimed. 'What right have you, who are my negro, to talk to me about what you would like and and what you don't like? I am your master and you shall obey me.' (75)

In this scene Linda Brent reveals the ever-shifting and conflicting relationships between slavery, religion, literacy and sexuality. She repeatedly faces conflicting "authoritative discourses:" that of the slave master, that of the Bible and the master discourse of true womanhood. In this scene, we see the way that slavery clearly illuminates issues about literacy which seem overlooked in novels like Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*. In the case of Ellen Montgomery, the child's desire to be obedient to John Humphreys and her religious literacy are never at odds, because she is fortunate enough to be in a situation where John expects the same thing from Ellen as does the Bible. When Ellen retreats to her room to read, she undergoes a kind of reverse transformation, emerging from her isolation more dependent upon John's mastery. But in Linda's case, her master requires her to simultaneously obey and disobey the teachings of the Bible. He wants her to follow the ethic of submission dictated by the Bible and he also wants her to disobey the Bible's teachings about adultery. Furthermore he uses her ability to read his letters to further this sinful end. Linda can see these conflicting ideologies working at cross purposes and she chooses at that moment to adhere to the one which protects her: the very same ability to read the Bible which oppresses slaves by reinforcing an ethic of submission acts to protect her by providing an argument against Dr. Flint. Because such potential dangers of literacy are unacknowledged in Warner's novel, Ellen never emerges as a literate being into a critical consciousness which allows her to understand the dangers of her entirely passive reading of the Bible. Ellen fully internalizes the "authoritative discourse" of the Bible and of her "brother" John, so that her ultimate goal is to completely deny her own "internally persuasive discourse" which makes her want to rebel. And since she is assured physical and financial security, and a sexual relationship sanctioned by the Bible, John's use of reading as a means of

training Ellen in submission poses no threat to her physical well-being.

Brent's experiences with Dr. Flint, however, reveal slavery's capacity to corrupt the Bible's demand for obedience into a rationale for rape and thus underscore the slave's need for a multilayered literacy as a means of resistance and self-protection. Linda Brent's narrative dramatizes the potential dangers of complete literary submission as she struggles to negotiate among conflicting authoritative discourses without losing her own sense of an internally persuasive discourse. Unlike Ellen who reads passively and never writes, Linda's experiences of literacy as a character within the narrative constantly shift between acts of self-isolation and acts of cultural negotiation. She alternately reads and refuses to read, writes and refuses to write as acts of self-preservation dictated by the situation she finds herself in.<sup>2</sup>

In the beginning of this chapter I began to examine the relationship literacy and sexuality in Jacobs's narrative by looking at the way letter writing was used by Dr. Flint to attempt to seduce Linda Brent. I argued that Linda understands the intimacy of literacy and the way that such literary intimacy can be oppressive or potentially protective, depending on the circumstances. I discussed as well the need for such private acts to ultimately lead to an emergence from the experience of isolation. In this section I would like to turn Linda's other experiences with her sexual identity as a slave, experiences which are not directly tied to literate acts, but in which Linda Brent exercises the same level of sophistication in responding to potential acts of oppression. Her response to the sexual oppression is much like her ability to contextualize literacy; in fact they follow similar patterns.

Many critics have explored *Incidents'* handling of sexuality. The

narrative has been called revolutionary precisely because of its double-voicedness, because it was the first slave narrative to deal explicitly with the sexual exploitation of female slaves while working within the social script of female obedience; the narrative addresses the isolating nature of sexual oppression and Harriet Jacobs's difficult attempt to make such a delicate matter part of the public discourse about slavery. As Karen Sanchez-Eppler explains, "the constraints of the body and the constraints of her narrative replicate each other--the act of writing is affiliated with self-mastery and enslavement" (84).

In early chapters of the narrative Linda Brent chronicles her struggles to protect her virginity in the face of relentless advances by the lecherous Dr. Flint. At first, Linda tries to live by the master discourse of true womanhood, closely guarding her virginity, like her efforts to reclaim the protection afforded by illiteracy. She strives diligently to ignore Dr. Flint's efforts to "corrupt the pure principles [her] grandmother had instilled" (29). Initially, Linda chooses to remain silent about Dr. Flint's behavior: "I was very young and I felt shamefaced about telling . . . such impure things . . . [B]oth pride and fear kept me silent" (29). As for Dr. Flint, he understands Linda's desire to adhere to the standards of the true woman which is why he tempts her by claiming that if she accepts his advances and becomes his mistress he will make a 'lady' of her. As she was also trapped by opposing ideologies of literacy, Linda becomes trapped among "authoritative discourses," about sexuality: the externally-defined ideology of true womanhood, which requires her to remain virtuous, and the realities of chattel slavery which require complete submission to her master and thus offer her "no chance to be respectable" (76). Jacobs is victimized by a social structure which does not acknowledge the violence of her

reality.<sup>3</sup> She explains: "[Dr. Flint] told me that I was made for his use, made to obey his command in every thing; that I was nothing but a slave whose will must and should surrender to his" (18).

Frederick Douglass survives by constantly shifting his perspective, by maneuvering his point of view both inside and "outside the circle" of southern culture and by shifting quite fluidly among various authoritative discourses. Similarly, Harriet Jacobs's response to being trapped is to retreat into the chrysalis not of literary isolation, but of sexual and moral liminality. She carves out a position of moral liminality by claiming that "the position of a slave confuses all principles of morality, and, in fact, renders the practice of them impossible . . . In looking back, calmly, on the events of my life, I feel that the slave woman ought not be judged by the same standards as others" (55-56). Speaking here about sexual matters, Jacobs is articulating the need for a kind of sexual metaliteracy, for the ability to master all the different levels of discourse about sexuality and also to revise them through the autobiographical act. She is saying that the standards used to judge others, the "authoritative discourses" of her time, do not acknowledge (in fact, they contradict) the experience of the slave woman, her own "internally persuasive discourse." From this position of marginality Linda Brent manages to elude the requisites of Victorian sexuality and manipulate her sexual power to her advantage. Ultimately, Linda manages to escape Dr. Flint's sexual advances by engaging in a sexual affair with another white man, Mr. Sands. Brent explains: "I knew nothing would enrage Dr. Flint so much as to know that I favored another and it was something to triumph over my tyrant even in that small way" (53). In this act, as Jean Fagan Yellin tells us, Linda "relinquishes her purity in an effort to maintain her self-respect; she abandons her attempts to avoid sexual



involvement in an attempt to assert her authority as a human being, to avoid being entirely subject to the will of another" (xxx). Like Frederick Douglass's trickery in the boatyard, Linda creates a space of autonomy and manufactures a choice where none had previously existed.

In choosing to engage in a sexual relationship with Mr. Sands over submission to Dr. Flint, Brent consciously uses her sexuality as a shield to deflect his attempted sexual exploitation, just as she used illiteracy to her advantage. "I knew what I did and I did it with deliberate calculation" (54). In this act, Linda exhibits a control over sexuality which replicates her control over literacy, because she is manipulating various levels of discourse about sexuality in order to assert control over her own body. As she explains: "There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you except that which he gains by kindness and attachment" (55). As in Douglass's story, freedom here is defined as a means of transcending or eluding an experience of oppression, even while still in physical bondage. But there is a cost: this relative freedom alienates Linda from society and shuts her off from her family because it is also an act of disobedience; it pushes her into the alienating "chrysalis experience" of unwed motherhood. When her grandmother discovers Linda's pregnancy, she shuts Linda out. "You are a disgrace to your dead mother . . . Go away . . . and never come to my house again" (57) she tells her granddaughter. Linda's choice makes her an outcast from her family. Ironically, however, being misjudged by her grandmother (who does not know of Dr. Flint's treachery) invites Jacobs's readers--who do know her difficult situation--to judge correctly and to feel sympathy for her position. By providing her readers with the insight that her grandmother did not have, Jacobs privileges them, making it more difficult for them to also judge her actions harshly.

As a writer, Harriet Jacobs judiciously employs textual omissions and elisions about issues of sexuality, the textual equivalent of playing dumb with Dr. Flint. These silences about her sexuality replicate the silences and the secrecy of being inside the chrysalis. It is difficult to read around the silences and to fully understand why Linda makes her decisions because so much of the experience is hidden from our view and remains invisible. For example, Linda Brent claims that she makes her "desperate . . . plunge into the abyss" (53) because she imagines that in his rage Dr. Flint will sell her and her white lover will be able to buy her freedom. But even though Linda claims that she imagines Dr. Flint will sell her, such a claim seems like a cover for something she would prefer not to discuss publicly. In fact, twice earlier in the narrative, Brent asserts that she knows Dr. Flint will never agree to sell her to anyone. In the chapter titled "The Lover" Linda explains that her young black lover wanted to marry her but she knew that "Dr. Flint was too willful and arbitrary a man to consent to such an arrangement" (37). In ending the relationship with her young lover, Brent reasons that "there was no hope the doctor would consent to sell me on any terms" (42). It is therefore not entirely true that Brent becomes sexually involved with Sands in the hope that Flint will sell her. In fact, her earlier assumptions about Dr. Flint are accurate. He does refuse to sell her when he finds out about the affair with Sands. When Linda realizes her error in judgment, "[h]ope dies away in her heart" (60) and she becomes more rather than less vulnerable since her child will also become Dr. Flint's property and thus another avenue for her victimization. It seems more likely that Jacobs is simply protecting herself by diverting attention away from the private and sexual nature of her choice.

Moreover, Brent's second pregnancy, which is generally ignored in the narrative, also makes it unlikely that her sole reason for involvement with

Sands was the hope of being sold. It also makes it more likely that Jacobs is consciously choosing textual silence about such matters as a means of self-protection. To offer any other reason for Brent's sexual involvement would alienate her even further because it would be an acknowledgement that Linda had chosen to remain sexually active for reasons other than her desire to avoid her master's advances. Acknowledging her reasons for maintaining a sexual relationship with Sands would threaten Jacobs's sympathetic position with her audience which she has delicately nurtured throughout the narrative. Moreover, the form of the sentimental novel, from which Jacobs borrows, doesn't provide the means of discussing a second instance of childbirth outside marriage, so she explains her new "link to life" solely in terms of the fact that it makes Dr. Flint more angry. Brent details Flint's response to learning she was pregnant. He cuts all of her hair off and strikes her. By focusing on slavery's evils against women by underscoring Dr. Flint's violence against a pregnant woman, Jacobs attempts to deflect her readers' attention from Linda Brent's "shameful acts" to the evils of slavery. And by continuing to couch her second pregnancy in the rhetoric of victimization, Jacobs diverts attention from her sexuality to her maternity, hoping to reinforce her common identity with her audience, many of whom are mothers themselves.

Indeed, the portrait the Brent paints of slave motherhood is bleak. Speaking of the pain of New Year's day, when the slave mother must anticipate the sale of her children on the auction block, she explains: "She sits on the cold cabin floor, watching the children who may all be torn from her the next morning and often does she wish that she might die before the day dawns. She may be an ignorant creature, degraded by the system that has brutalized her from childhood, but she has a mother's instinct and is capable of feeling a mother's agonies" (12). Jacobs knows that one commonality she will have with

her northern white female audience is their shared belief in the sacred bond of motherhood. Though many critics have discussed the difficulties with Jacobs's efforts to identify with her female readers, she does attempt to use this common identity as a means of drawing her audience into the agony of the slave experience, especially upon the birth of her second child, a daughter. She explains that "when they told me my new-born child was a girl, my heart was heavier than it had ever been before. Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women" (77).<sup>4</sup>

Despite Linda Brent's anxiety about having a child in slavery and her wishes for her own and her child's death when she is pregnant with her first child, her first words upon Benjamin's birth are "God let it live" (60). Linda's identity as a mother ultimately gives her a renewed strength to resist, emanating from a need to emerge from the chrysalis to protect her children.<sup>5</sup> Though she remains confined to her bed for many weeks after Benjamin's birth, motherhood is a transformative "chrysalis experience" because it changes the very nature of who she is: "My life became bound up in my children" (101). Like Ruth Hall, who embarked upon a difficult path in order to feed her children, Linda becomes willing to undergo hardships for the sake of her children she would not undergo for herself alone: "Every trial I endured, every sacrifice I made for their sakes drew them closer to my heart and gave me fresh courage to beat back the dark waves that rolled and rolled over me in a seemingly endless night of storms" (90). Instead of seeing her children as her scarlet letter and a means of further subjugation, Linda's children become her reason to renegotiate a sense of identity and her ties to life, the source of her deep courage and her solace in pain: "The little vine was taking a deep root in my existence, though its clinging fondness excited a mixture of love and pain.

When I was most sorely oppressed, I found solace in his smiles" (62).

At the same time that Linda's sexual choices make her an outcast from proper society, they also, like the chrysalis stage of literary isolation, provide her renewed strength and the power to redirect her destiny. Moreover, in this and other "chrysalis experiences," the transformation is emancipatory, according to the definition of emancipation offered by Jacqueline Jones. According to Jones, emancipation was not something that was given to blacks, but rather was "a process by which black people ceased to labor for their masters and sought instead to work for one another. Control over one's labor and over one's family represented a dual gauge by which freedom could be measured" (46). Jones reminds us that slave women lacked control of their own productive and reproductive powers. Brent's motherhood constitutes a reappropriation of those reproductive powers just as slaves' acts of writing represented a reappropriation of their powers of literary production. While Valerie Smith sees the relationship with Mr. Sands as Linda's source of power in the narrative, I would argue that it is not Sands who nurtures Linda's developing authority in the narrative, but her newfound maternal responsibility which becomes the primary motivating force in her life: "Had it not been for those ties to life, I should have been glad to have been released by death" (79). Maternal reproduction, achieved through the physical confinement of labor and the pain and isolation of unwed motherhood, is like the process of developing literateness. It is ultimately transformative to Brent.

In exploring the history of motherhood in African culture, Barbara Christian offers an explanation for such a development, claiming that the "birth of children was central to the slave woman's physical, emotional and social existence" (35). Christian also explains that the role of the mother "embodies a certain dignity and responsibility which is doubtless a carryover

from the African view that every mother is a symbol of marvelous creativity of the earth" (5). Motherhood, for most African peoples, is "symbolic of creativity and continuity and central to African philosophy and spirituality" (212-214). It is through this spiritual fulfillment that Brent's motherhood empowers her.

Not only was motherhood personally empowering, but Jones also tells us that in slave communities, "blacks' attempts to sustain their family life amounted to a political act of protest. Consequently, the family played a key role in the struggle to combat oppression, for black women's attention to the duties of motherhood deprived whites of full control of them as field laborers, domestic servants and brood sows" (12-13). In giving birth, and in freely choosing the father of her children, Linda Brent not only appropriated her reproductive powers, but her extended maternal confinement before and after childbirth also eliminated Dr. Flint's ability to usurp her powers of productive labor as a domestic servant because she was unable to work for him.<sup>6</sup>

Because Dr. Flint owns Linda's children, her position as a mother has the potential to make her more vulnerable in much the same way that her literacy made her vulnerable to him. However, it is only in her capacity as a mother, in an effort to protect her children that she ventures to escape from slavery: "I knew the doom that awaited my fair baby in slavery and I was determined to save her from it, or perish in the attempt" (90). When she learns that her children are to be brought to her at the plantation to be "broke in" and since she believes that Dr. Flint will sell her children if she is gone, and that their white father will buy and protect them, Brent flees. She was "resolved to foil [her] master and save [her] children" (84), explaining that "I had a woman's pride and a mother's love for her children . . . My master had power and law on his side; I had a determined will. There is might in each" (85). Buoyed by that

determined will and a sense of maternal responsibility, Linda Brent flees from the plantation in the middle of the night, thereby trading one "chrysalis experience" for another. After hiding out in the home of a trusted friend for several days, she ends up in the small garret space of her grandmother's storehouse, where she remains for the next seven years.

If we think about emancipation as the reappropriation of one's powers of production, then each of Jacobs's "chrysalis experiences" involved a process of emancipation because during each period of isolation Linda Brent was productive. Moreover, even though Linda Brent spent the next seven years confined in the crawl space above her grandmother's storehouse, she was emancipated in some sense because she was in control of her own labor, her literacy and, indirectly, even her children.

During the time she spent as a slave "hand" on young Mr. Flint's plantation, Brent was forced to ignore her children, spending all of her time sewing and preparing the house for the arrival of Mr. Flint's new bride. When she hears Ellen crying, she is unable to attend to her daughter's fears and when the children become sick, Linda is forced to send Ellen to her grandmother, as she does not have the time to care for them. She is thus separated from the children for long stretches as she continues to labor not for herself and her family, but for the Flint family. But once she flees from the plantation, Linda reappropriates control of her own labor. She reclaims her own "hands," using them to labor for herself and for her children as she passes time in the garret. She reads and she sews clothing for Ellen and Benjamin and watches over them from the hole she carves in the wall of her hiding place. She also has a commanding view of the street so that she sees many of Dr. Flint's activities as he searches in vain for her.

In this confinement, Linda has traded one "chrysalis experience" for another. Her socially alienated status of unwed motherhood is followed by painful physical isolation under horrifying circumstances: "To this hole I was conveyed" she explains. "The air was stifling, the darkness total. The rats came and ran over my bed. The continued darkness was oppressive. It seemed horrible to sit or lie in a cramped position day after day without one gleam of light" (114). While Linda claims she "would have chosen this [confinement] rather than [her] lot as a slave," the bittersweet nature of her position of relative freedom is clear in the ambiguity of her language. At the same time that her enclosed space was a "cell" it was also a "den" and even though it was a "prison" it was her "loophole of retreat." The literary metaphor "loophole," works to link Brent's physical confinement with literacy. Like literacy, which was alternately empowering and oppressive, the loophole provides an avenue of escape from Dr. Flint's control, but is also a means of further physical confinement.

In her confinement in the garret, Brent also uses literacy and secrecy to her advantage in much the same way that Dr. Flint had earlier used Linda's ability to read as a means of manipulating her. After her escape, Linda Brent reverses such tactics, this time using her ability to write as a means of assuming control over Dr. Flint. In the chapter "Competition in Cunning" Jacobs resolves to "match her cunning against his cunning" (128). From her garret, she gets hold of a newspaper from New York City and gathers from it a familiarity with some of the streets: "It was a piece of the New York Herald and for once the paper that systematically abused the colored people was made to render them a service" (128). She uses this information to fabricate a letter from herself in New York City to Dr. Flint. She gives it to a messenger to have postmarked from the city. In doing so, Linda's literate act creates a



fiction, convincing Flint that she has fled when she is, in fact, within arm's reach. In this instance she uses her pen (her textuality) as she did her body (her sexuality) as an instrument to subvert his control. In addition, by using the newspaper to advance her scheme, she subverts the efforts of authoritative discourse to perpetuate the institution of slavery.

G. Thomas Couser describes Brent's pattern of "averting and subverting her master's authority as a curious act of authorship" (141) for in selecting her place of confinement and using literacy to further her scheme Linda is writing her future and revising the authoritative discourse of slavery. Linda's hiding and her writing thus enable her to transform herself into a free woman.

Ironically, after Harriet Jacobs escapes from slavery and finally leaves the physical confinement of her grandmother's attic, she begins another "chrysalis experience," choosing further confinement, this time for more public literary ends. Like the nine months of maternal incubation, nine years spanned the period between the conception and publication of her own slave narrative (Foster 106). Most of the criticism on Jacobs's narrative has focused on the public aspect of that process, that is, her act of authorship and the difficulties of audience negotiation, which Frances Smith Foster describes as a process of mediating across the color line. For example, in discussing the difficulties Jacobs experienced in the process of constructing a public narrative, several critics have characterized the style of the narrative, which uses the rhetoric of the sentimental novel, as confining. Valerie Smith reads Jacobs's use of ellipses and ironies to address sensitive subjects as the formal equivalents of Jacobs's physical confinement, though Smith does not address the transformative value of those formal confinements.

Moreover, Jacobs's ability to constantly shift her perspective between

confinement and emergence, private and public, interior and exterior, is evident in her *process* of writing as well as the literary product itself. Jacobs's arduous process of penning her story, which occurred in the home of Nathaniel Willis between 1853 and 1858, also echoes her descriptions of the seven years of discomfort and isolation spent hiding in her grandmother's garret. In both situations, the physical conditions are limiting and all activities must be completed in relative darkness. Amy Post describes Jacobs's writing process as follows: "After the labors of the day were over, she traced secretly and wearily, by the midnight lamp, the truthful record of her life" (203). In her grandmother's attic years before, "the continued darkness was [also] oppressive" and in writing her narrative she explains that "it is hard for me to write as yet I have not written a single page by daylight" (239). In the garret, she was "tormented by hundreds of little red insects as fine as a needle's point, that pierced my skin and produced an intolerable burning" (114) and in her experience of writing in the Willis home she complains that "the mosquitoes have taken possession of [me]" (243). Even though she has escaped from slavery, as she writes her narrative Jacobs is still economically dependent upon the good will of her employers and with her long hours of work on their behalf, and "with the care of the little babies, [she] had but little time to think or write" (239). Her situation "compelled [her] to write . . . at irregular intervals, whenever [she] could snatch an hour away from household duties" (1).

The mirroring of these descriptions has the effect of connecting two seemingly disparate experiences in Jacobs life: her physical confinement as a slave and her literary confinement as a free woman, both "chrysalis" stages from which a transformation occurs. Secrecy is essential to both. Jacobs's desire to keep her act of writing a secret from her employer Nathaniel Willis is

understandable given what we know about Willis's attitude toward the literary career of his own sister, the highly successful author Fanny Fern (Sarah Payson Willis Parton). Willis's embarrassment at his sister's extreme poverty and his efforts to discourage Fern's writing are chronicled in her 1855 autobiographical novel *Ruth Hall* through the character of the foppish Hyacinth Ellet, who advises his sister to find "a less obtrusive employment" than writing. Harriet Jacobs was first employed by Nathaniel Willis in 1842 and she seems to have correctly anticipated what his attitude would be about her attempt to tell her own story: "Mr. W[illis] is too proslavery he [sic] would tell me that it was very wrong and that I was trying to do harm or perhaps he was sorry for me to undertake it while I was in his family" (232). Jacobs also secretly published letters in abolitionist newspapers about her life as a fugitive slave while working in the Willis home. Of these letters, she claims she "would not have Mrs. W[illis] to know it" (236).<sup>7</sup>

Jacobs's tenuous relationship with the Willis family after she had escaped from slavery and was living in the north is not unlike the position of Fanny Fern and her fictional protagonist, Ruth Hall. Both women were economically dependent upon others, and that dependence came with a price: submission. Taking up the pen was a means of working against that position of dependence and submission, but while Ruth Hall could strive for economic independence by becoming a successful authoress, Harriet Jacobs was in a much more difficult position. As an escaped slave with much less education and opportunity than Fern, she did not have the option of pursuing a career as a professional author. Literacy alone did not ensure freedom for Harriet Jacobs, as Dana Nelson Salvino reminds us. For freed slaves, literacy did not mean much in terms of social and economic acceptance among whites:

"Literacy could lead blacks out of physical, but not cultural and economic bondage" (153). Thus, even though she had physically escaped from Dr. Flint, Harriet Jacobs remained enslaved economically and by the prejudice against blacks that was a reality in her life, as detailed in the chapter "Prejudice Against Color."

For Harriet Jacobs, survival depended upon her ability to balance her desire for self-expression with a caution against offending her employers. Likewise, literary survival meant telling her own story truthfully, but with a deep consciousness of the sensibilities of her white readers. In addition to her fear of meeting with Willis's disapproval, Jacobs did not want anyone to know about her writing because she was embarrassed about the sexual oppression she experienced as a slave and she felt that it would be more proper, as a woman, to remain silent about her experiences. Like Ellen Montgomery, Jacobs frequently feels that a Christian should learn to accept the wrongs done to her: "[W]e poor mortals must always strive to teach our hearts submission to our circumstances [sic] it is a hard lesson but it is a blessing to those who truly practice it" (232). In this initial stance of Christian submissiveness, Harriet Jacobs characterizes literacy as an entirely personal act of self-assertion, which she must reject in order to be considered a "lady." Jacobs slowly begins to understand the political and public power of literacy, and in her developing process of literateness, she realizes (with encouragement from her close friend Amy Post) that her story has the potential to help the many slave women still in slave bondage. Like Ruth Hall, who writes on behalf of the women subject to the slavery of "six cents a day," Harriet Jacobs realizes that "if [my story] could help save another from my fate it would be unchristian in me to keep it back" (232). In this way of understanding literacy, this balance between private benefit and public good, the act of

writing becomes both a womanly act of selflessness and a public act of moral responsibility, and she thus consents to tell her story.<sup>8</sup>

Once she agrees to write her story, to make her experience public, Jacobs is in a position similar to that of Frederick Douglass in that the rhetorical triangle of her literate activity becomes more complex. On the one hand, she is writing primarily for a northern, white, female audience whose sensibilities might be offended by any discussion of sexuality. On the other hand, her constituency is the millions of slave women for whom sexual oppression was a violent reality. Jacobs herself violated many of the rules of proper female behavior by having two children out of wedlock, so she was literally caught between the need to tell truthfully her experiences as a female slave and the simultaneous desire not to alienate her audience. Despite her own apparent rejection of nineteenth-century Christian moral standards, Jacobs manages to maintain the sympathy of her largely white, Christian audience in several ways. First, she makes full use of the 'trope of humility' to ask the pardon of her readers and to portray an attitude of repentance at her misdeeds. She claims that she is incompetent as a storyteller, "I wish I were more competent to the task I have undertaken," (1) and in letters to her friend Amy Post Jacobs repeatedly underestimates her skill as a writer, claiming of her book: "though I can never make it a butterfly I am satisfied to have it creep among some of the humbler bugs" (238). She also frequently asks the pardon of her readers: "[R]eader, I come to a period in my unhappy life which I would gladly forget if I could. The remembrance fills me with sorrow and shame. It pains me to tell you of it, but I have promised to tell you the truth, and I will do it honestly, let it cost me what it may" (54-55). This stance of modesty borrows from the rhetoric of the sentimental novel, even as Jacobs

subverts its message.<sup>9</sup>

Jacobs describes her process of writing as a womanly act of selflessness, characterizing herself in a way that would allow her audience to identify with her objectives. She is concerned about how her readers think about her, explaining to Amy Post that she wants her friend to make it clear to others that the narrative was written only because of Post's insistence. Jacobs also wants it made known that "I lived in service all the while I was striving to get the Book out . . . neither would I like to have people think that I was living an Idle life - and I had got this book out merely to make money" (242). Connecting her literacy to an agenda of selflessness, Jacobs characterizes her story as a gift, calling the narrative the "giving of her past life" in much the same way that her initial decision to escape from slavery was characterized as act of personal sacrifice for her children, as a means of protecting them from the clutches of her master, Dr. Flint. In this way, for Jacobs literacy is both an means of resisting the institution of slavery and the ultimate act of female good will and maternal selflessness. She writes out of her identity as a woman and a "poor slave mother," drawing on one of the few common roles she shares with her mostly female audience. Jacobs explains that "I do earnestly desire to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women in the South, still in bondage" (1). We can see in these comments the difficulties of translating her private experiences into a public document, of moving out of the isolation of the chrysalis.

Even though Jacobs feels justified in her act of writing, the process is a constant source of secrecy and shame. "Dear Amy" Jacobs writes to Post in 1852 "your proposal has been thought over and over again, but not without

some painful remembrances . . . if it was the life of a Heroine with no degradation associated with it, [it would be easier to tell]" (232). As Jacobs explained to Amy Post and her editor Lydia Maria Child "a woman can whisper cruel wrongs in the ear of a friend much easier than she can record them for the world to read" (204). Here we see Jacobs beginning to articulate the conflicting experiences of literacy. The public act of literacy does not offer the emotional support of intimate oral conversation, which is perhaps why she initially chooses to keep the process of writing private, away from the watchful eye of her disapproving employer and a potentially unsympathetic public. It is also a likely explanation for Jacobs's decision to write under a pseudonym and fictionalize the names of people and places even though she claims that she "concealed the names of places, and [gave] persons fictitious names . . . [not] on my own account, but [because] I deemed it kind and considerate towards others to pursue this course" (1)--again, assuming a stance of selflessness, of privacy within a public act.

At the same time, however, Jacobs portrays herself as woman who forcefully acknowledges her own choices, who assumes full responsibility for her actions. While she apologizes to her readers before discussing her sexual relationship with Mr. Sands and claims that she "wanted to keep [herself] pure," (54) she also claims that she "will not try to screen [herself] behind the pleas of a compulsion from a master." Neither, she explains "can I plead ignorance or thoughtlessness" (54), the very approach ~~which she~~ took in evading Dr. Flint's advances. Jacobs's effort to retain her own autonomy are inconsistent with the submissive stance she has portrayed, but she manages this constant shifting back and forth between her rejection of nineteenth-century morality and her desire to remain "a lady" by becoming what William Andrews calls an "interstitial autobiographer." She maintains the sympathy

of her audience by depicting herself as existing in between standard religious and social classifications (172). Even though, as Sara Way Sherman explains, Jacobs has no ideology or language to justify her choices[s] (174), her repeated acts of selected confinement represent her effort to make room for herself between existing ideologies. In these cracks and crevices, behind walls, under covers of darkness and secrecy--"in the spaces left" to use Douglass's words--Harriet Jacobs emerges as a literate being. She manages to balance the "authoritative discourse" of true womanhood with the "internally persuasive discourse" of slave experience. The narrative, as many critics have agreed, is thus "double-voiced discourse." In the words of Bakhtin, her narrative "serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking [the female slave] and the refracted intention of the author [the woman writer]" (324). The chrysalis, Jacobs's womblike confinement, is the physical embodiment of this double-voicedness.

The transformation of Jacob's literary identity, her gradual process of emerging from the chrysalis, is evident only in her private correspondence with Amy Post and her editor Lydia Maria Child. Gradually we see the change from a fugitive slave on the run who initially wanted someone else to tell her story for her, to a free woman, an emergent writer who felt the need to tell her own story and who eventually also assumes control of the narrative, wresting it from the hands of her white editors and also from the novelist Harriet Beecher Stowe.

Jean Fagan Yellin has explained that Jacobs originally believed that it would be better for the well-known Stowe--her culture's 'authoritative discourse' against slavery--to write her story. Jacobs explains to Amy Post that "I can give you my Ideas much better then write them" (232) and she



claims that "if Mrs. Stowe would undertake it I should like to be with her a Month I should want the History of my childhood and the first five years in one volume and the next three and my home in the northern states in the second besides I could give her some fine sketches for her pen on slavery" (233). But Stowe only wanted to use Jacob's story in her *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Jacobs, however, felt strongly that her story deserved its own treatment. She wanted the story to be "a history of my life entirely by itself which would do more good and it needed no romance" (235). Jacobs thus refused to subordinate her story to Stowe, though she does explain that if Stowe "wanted some facts for her book I would be most happy to give her some" (235). During the process of these negotiations between Jacobs and Stowe, intermediated by Mrs. Willis and Amy Post, a series of incidents upset Jacobs, who felt belittled by Stowe's treatment. Jacobs explains "I think [Mrs. Stowe] did not like my objection I can't help it" (235). As Yellin, Jacobs's biographer explains, Jacobs distrusted Harriet Beecher Stowe and "she felt that Stowe had betrayed her as a woman, denigrated her as a mother, and threatened her as a writer" (xix) by attempting to appropriate Jacobs' intensely private experience. Jacobs also felt Stowe was insensitive to her concerns about how her story would be publicly portrayed. Stowe's insensitivity amounted to her failure to acknowledge the intensely private attributes of Jacobs's story.<sup>10</sup>

Jacobs's determination to wrest control of her story from Stowe and her desire to keep the narrative a secret from Nathaniel Willis were costly decisions. She had some difficulty getting the narrative printed without an "authenticating document" from a well known white like Stowe or Willis, but Jacobs stood her ground. Eventually, she turned to Lydia Maria Child for help. Child edited the narrative and provided a letter attesting to its veracity.

Jacobs's letters reveal that she maintained a lot of control in the process of bringing the narrative public, including an inordinate amount of participation in the publishing process. Many scholars of the slave narrative claim that slave narratives were "owned" by white abolitionists in much the same way that the slaves themselves were owned and that the textual autonomy of the slave narrative is non-existent because their credibility is dependent upon the extra-narrative documentation from whites (120), Harriet Jacobs managed to resist that pattern. Though the narrative does have two letters attesting to its authenticity, as Yellin reminds us the authenticating letters are from a white woman, Child, and a black man, Charles Lowther, both friends of the writer.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, Jacobs managed to have the first word, as the narrative opens with a Preface from the author herself. Jacobs's aggressive involvement in the process of bringing her story to the public reversed the general trend in slave narratives, in which the writer's control was usually superseded in the publishing process by abolitionist supporters.

As Jean Fagan Yellin reminds us, once the narrative was published it never sold well and brought Jacobs only limited publicity. Harriet Jacobs thus never experienced any financial rewards as a result of her public authorship, unlike Frederick Douglass, whose narrative sold widely in America and Europe and who made a career as a writer and orator after his escape from slavery. But her ability to maintain control over its publication and writing, while not providing economic freedom, still illustrates Jacobs's authority, her autonomy as a writer. And while Harriet Jacobs's process of developing literateness never provided her with a public career, there are many indications that literacy held other, more private forms of liberation for Jacobs during her life as a free woman. For example, she explains that one of her chief pleasures after

escaping from slavery is her ability to read. "My narrow mind began to expand under the opportunities of intelligent conversation, and the opportunity for reading, which were gladly allowed me whenever I had leisure from my duties" (169). Moreover, one of Jacobs's primary concerns in terms of her responsibilities as a mother, is that her children become literate. Her daughter Ellen felt "ashamed at not being able to read or spell" so Jacobs "instructed her . . . till she was fitted to enter an intermediate school. The winter passed pleasantly, while I was busy with my needle, and my child with her book" (182). And while in living in Rochester during 1849, Jacobs worked in an antislavery reading room, which was in the same building as the offices of Frederick Douglass's newspaper *The North Star*. Jacobs's letters reveal that "in the eighteen months she spent in Rochester, she read her way through the abolitionist library of papers and books" (xvi). Jacobs also met weekly with a group of abolitionist women "to sew, knit, read and talk for the cause" (xvi).

In addition, Jacobs's literacy more than once saved her from being recaptured. The Fugitive Slave law allowed her former enslavers to come North to try and retrieve their property. But she had gotten into the habit of reading the newspapers daily: "Every evening I examined the newspapers carefully, to see what Southerners had put up at hotels. I did this for my own sake, thinking that my young mistress and her husband might be among the list; I wished also to give information to others, if necessary; for if many were 'running to and fro,' I resolved that 'knowledge should be increased'" (191-192). One day, seconds before the house boy burns the papers, she remembers to look over the names of new arrivals, and sees Dr. Flint's daughter and her husband have arrived in town. She immediately flees, thus protecting herself from possible recapture. In this instance as in others, she uses her literate ability as a way to elude the enslaving capacity of her former masters.

At the same time this experience shows how literacy secured her freedom, Linda is careful to explain to her readers that the only reason she was in danger in the first place was because her white enslavers were still in control of public literacies, laws which allowed the recapture of slaves even if they were legally free. She explains: "the reader probably knows that no promise of writing given to a slave is legally binding" (7) and "if [a master] were to give [a slave] free papers, the would [frequently] be so managed as to have no legal value" (7). As Frederick Douglass's narrative also reminds us, the culture of slavery repeatedly uses literacy for oppressive means, corrupting the written word, even the law, so that it has no connection to truth or reality.

Linda does manage to escape by using her ability to read, but she also acknowledges that she is repeatedly aided in her efforts to sustain her freedom by the kindness of her mistress, Mrs. Bruce. Mrs. Bruce allows Linda to take her daughter with her when she flees as a means of protection. She explains "It is better for you to have the baby with you, Linda; for if they get you on your track, they will be obliged to bring the baby to me; and then, if there is a possibility of saving you, you shall be saved" (194). In fact, in each of Harriet Jacobs's periods of chosen confinement, her transformation is ultimately successful because of loved ones who watch over her and provide protection from outside harm. So at the same time that Harriet Jacobs's narrative explores the power of individual will and the value of isolation, the story also acknowledges that it is only on behalf of and through relationships established within a community that Jacobs successfully forges an identity outside the confines of slavery. By the end of the narrative, Jacobs's regeneration has come through the emotional, spiritual and physical support of an extended community of friends, both male and female, black and white, without whose

support her stages of isolation would have been untenable.<sup>12</sup>

Jacobs's story reveals that literacy provides access to liberation when it is propelled by a sense of moral responsibility within a supportive community. In each and every "chrysalis pattern," Jacobs experiences, friends and sometimes even complete strangers, are waiting on the sidelines to assist her in the metamorphosis. Her first mistress teaches her to read; her grandmother's support is unrelenting; her friend Amy Post repeatedly comes to her aid; Lydia Maria Child helps in her developing literateness. Harriet Jacobs manages to escape with the help of a series of friends, including the female slaveholder and the many fellow slaves who provided her hiding places. And while many of these relationships provide support for Jacobs in her process of developing literateness (as in the case of Peter, the sailor who brings her newspapers and gets her letters to New York to be postmarked) literacy gets redefined along Harriet Jacobs's pathway to freedom. The many supportive relationships which allow the chrysalis to remain intact in a threatening environment attest to the communal aspect of literary isolation. In Jacobs's redefinition of literacy it exceeds the boundaries of physical textuality and becomes a model of responsible human behavior. It is because of and on behalf of her past and present communities that Jacobs is able to survive and to write her narrative, allowing her to return in 1867 to her grandmother's old home. "Twelve feet from where [she] suffered the crushing weight of slavery" she proclaims in a voice speaking for all who believe in freedom: "Thank God the bitter cup of slavery is drained of its last dregs. There is no more need of hiding places to conceal slave mothers" (129). There is still, however, as Jacobs's story repeatedly attests to, transformative value within the chrysalis' concealment.

## NOTES FOR CHAPTER III

1. Valerie Smith also reminds us that feminist scholarship, particularly the work of Gilbert and Gubar, has shown that women's writing of the nineteenth century abounds with images of confinement. Such imagery reflects the limitations imposed upon women writers given their desire to write in a society which deemed the act of writing unwomanly. Additional restraints, argue Gilbert and Gubar, come from the traditional association of literary creativity with male artists, and the pen with the penis, or generative paternity. Women are represented as objects of art, but never as creators of art. Jacobs, in using the chrysalis image to characterize her acts of confinement as ultimately creative, revises this tradition, positing a womblike image as the source of her literary creativity. Smith also sees the style of the narrative, which uses the rhetoric of the sentimental novel, as confining. My interest in the patterns of confinement in the narrative differs from Smith in that I focus on Jacobs's reappropriation of her productive powers which occur as a result of her isolation.

Debra Humphreys, in a Foucauldian reading of Jacobs's confinement, argues that Jacobs subverts the power relations of public and private spaces. Humphreys reads Jacobs as constantly appropriating and redefining liminal or marginal spaces, by reversing the "gaze" which functions as the surveying apparatus. The narrative "reveals the imbalances and instabilities in power relations that open up these spaces of resistance and loopholes of retreat" (149). I see the same instabilities in literacy as a form of power. See "Power and Resistance in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*."

2. Linda's struggle with conflicting sources of authority puts her in the middle of the deepening debate in the antebellum period about discipline, as discussed by Richard H. Brodhead. As the American middle class redefined itself in the antebellum period, Brodhead explains that "disciplinary intimacy"--as illustrated perhaps through Linda's relationship with her grandmother--superseded corporal punishment as a means of socialization. Brodhead argues that "disciplinary intimacy" includes the personalization of authority and a "sentimentalization of the disciplinary relation" in which authority is expressed through affection. In this approach, "authentic power [expresses itself] in tenderness, not rigor [and operates] by methods that are silent and imperceptible" (21). As a slave, Linda is caught between this understanding of discipline and the corporal punishment which is a central aspect of slavery. The narrative thus "juxtaposes a world of corporal correction . . . and a world of correction by interiority" (29).

This very same process of "disciplinary intimacy" is at work on the reader of the narrative, as the experience of reading creates a relationship of intimacy and thus obedience. See *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America*, Chapter 1: "Sparing the Rod: Discipline and Fiction in Antebellum America."

3. Frances Smith Foster argues that using Linda Brent does not support the values of true womanhood. She argues that the ideal of "real womanhood" posed by Frances Cogan is a more appropriate way of understanding Brent and the women in her narrative. See *Written By Herself: Literary Production by African American Women, 1746-1892*, 112-113.

4. Hazel Carby argues that Jacobs's narrative works more dramatically to polarize the experiences of black and white women to reveal that both northern and southern women were implicated in the oppression of slavery. Carby discusses the hierarchical difference in power relations between black and white women, upon which "an ideology was built which ensured that two opposing concepts of motherhood and womanhood were maintained" (54). She claims that this difference prevented any bonding across racial barriers. Ultimately, Carby argues, "the motherhood that Jacobs defined and shaped in her narrative was vindicated through her own daughter, excluding the need for any approval from the readership . . . [and] making external validation unnecessary and unwarranted" (61).

5. Roberta Rubenstein reminds us that "maternity itself is another portent image of boundary . . . [as it is] the first time a woman crosses the dramatic psychological threshold and acquires a new social role as a mother" (5).

6. Paula Giddings also explains that the most dramatic and least known act of female resistance was the refusal of slaves to have children and increase the labor force of the master. Slave women used contraceptives and other abortive methods in an attempt to resist the system. See *When and Where I Enter*, 45.

7. Jacobs first worked for the Willis family in 1842. She traveled with Willis to England in 1845 to care for his daughter Imogen after the death of his first wife, Mary Stace Willis. She returned to work for Willis in 1850 at the request of his new wife, Cornelia Grinnell Willis and wrote her narrative in their home between the years of 1853 and 1858. Cornelia Grinnell Willis purchased Jacobs's freedom in 1852. The Willis family is given the pseudonym Bruce in Jacobs's narrative. See Jean Fagan Yellin's, "Introduction" to *Incidents*.

According to Joyce W. Warren, Louisa Matilda Jacobs, Harriet's daughter, lived with Fanny Fern, Willis's sister from July 1856 to April 1858. Warren explains that Jacobs had told Fanny Fern her story, and that Fern's silence about it in her public career indicates the degree to which she respected Jacobs's desire to keep her story private. Fern "felt a special obligation to Jacobs who, she said, was one of the few people who stuck by her when others did not" (223). See Warren, *Fanny Fern: An Independent Woman*. Lauren Berlant also discusses the connection between Jacobs and Fern in "The Female Woman: Fanny Fern and the Form of Sentiment."

8. Jacobs's fear of writing and her expressed preference for silence is characteristic of many women writers, dating back to the Renaissance.

According to Margaret Hannay, silence was considered a primary virtue for women during the Tudor period, closely connected with chastity, as the proverb, "An eloquent woman is never chaste" reminds us. Tudor women were permitted to break the code of silence only to demonstrate their religiosity and then, they used the modesty topos "with vivid intensity" (1). Jacobs herself characterizes her writing as a work with religious objectives. See Hannay, "Introduction" to *Silent But For the Word: Tudor Woman as Patrons, Translators, and Writers of Religious Works*.

9. A central emphasis in the criticism of Jacobs's narrative centers on the ways in which she was limited by and/or subverted the received forms of the sentimental novel and the slave narrative. Valerie Smith argues that Jacobs revises the prototypical rugged individualism which is a central strain of male slave narratives, by focusing on the self-in-relation and underscoring her reliance on other people in her plot toward freedom. As Smith explains, "as long as the rhetoric of the [slave narrative] identified freedom and independence of thought with manhood, it lacks a category for describing the achievements of the tenacious black woman" (35). Smith further argues that Jacobs uses the plot structure of popular domestic fiction as a means of making her story familiar to her readers, but she also revises the form because in many ways it is inadequate to describe the experience of the slave. Frances Smith Foster discusses the impact of the religious narrative tradition and the anti-slavery novel on Jacobs's narrative.

Annette Niemtow explores the way in which Jacobs used the rhetoric of the sentimental novel as a means of discussing her potential sexual exploitation. Jean Fagan Yellin explains that much of Jacobs's story follows patterns standard to the slave narrative genre, though she does acknowledge that it diverges from the quest for "literacy and freedom" by focusing instead on the slave mother's search for freedom and a home. Yellin also explores the way the narratives revised the "tragic mulatto" stereotype of white fiction, the genres of the seduction novel and woman's fiction of the nineteenth century. Hazel Carby points out the way that the closing pages of Jacobs's narrative revised the "marriage" happy endings of the conventional domestic novel (48) as a means of challenging an ideology which does not account for the slave experience. Debra Humphreys concentrates on the way that Jacobs's narrative subverts the discourse of domestic feminism by resisting its efforts to preserve the separation between private and public spheres. She explains that in Jacobs's narrative, survival depends upon dismantling the boundaries between private and public (146). She also explores the way that Jacobs seems unwilling to conform to the conventions of the sentimental novel by using the language of sentimentality ironically.

10. Debra Humphreys's discussion of the way that the narrative illustrates the danger of the "purely" private realm points to another important distinction between the literate experiences of Ellen and Linda. Humphreys explains that "unlike writers wedded to a domestic ideology that regards the private as a safe haven from the threatening public realm, Jacobs portrays



the private as a dangerous place--dangerous because it is outside a somewhat protective public gaze that exerts power over both slaves and master" (145). Likewise, while the private experiences of literacy threaten Linda Brent, Ellen's private reading experiences are characterized as moments of safety.

11. For a further discussion of the details of Jacobs's efforts to bring her narrative public, see Jean Fagan Yellin's "Introduction."

12. Many critics have discussed the way that Jacobs's acknowledgement of the role of community in her search for freedom separates her story from the "rugged individualism" of male slave narratives. Valerie Smith explains that "Jacobs's tale is not the classic story of the triumph of individual will; rather it is a more a story of a triumphant self-in-relation" (33). Debra Humphreys also explains that "the most powerful spaces and actions in her narrative are ones of community and extended family that cut across these rigidly defined distinctions between private and public . . . [thus offering] a powerful feminist message about the strength that derives from extrafamilial community, networkism and the danger that lies in domestic isolation and isolation from a sense of community in general" (154). Jean Fagan Yellin also discusses the importance of Linda's familial support in her search for freedom as well as the narrative's central pattern that "shows white woman betraying allegiance of race and class to assert their stronger allegiance to the sisterhood of all women" (xxxiii). Houston Baker discusses the way in which Jacobs's narrative, "unlike the narratives of Vassa and Douglass . . . gives us a sense of collective, rather than individualistic, black identity" (55). Hazel Carby however, maintains that a hierarchy between black and white women remains in the narrative, with Jacobs vilifying the white woman's role in the perpetuation of slavery (48-49).

## CHAPTER IV

### *LITTLE WOMEN'S LITERACY LESSONS*

I have done what I planned,--supported myself, written eight stories, taught four months, earned a hundred dollars, and sent money home.

--Louisa May Alcott

All the philosophy in our house is not in the study; a good deal is in the kitchen, where a fine old lady thinks high thoughts and does kind deeds while she cooks and scrubs.

--Louisa May Alcott

The journals of Louisa May Alcott are a literacy kaleidoscope. It is abundantly clear from reading them that for Alcott, like her contemporary Fanny Fern, writing was simultaneously a public, economic activity and an extension of her personal, domestic responsibilities. Her journals are full of anxious mathematical tabulations about how much money she would earn from various publications and an unmistakable sense that writing would lead to financial independence not only for herself, but for her family as well, for whom Alcott was the principal breadwinner. As she said in a typical journal entry: "[I wrote] a story . . . and got twenty-five dollars which pieced up our summer gowns and bonnets all around. The inside of my head can at least cover the outside" (80). Such comments attest to Alcott's sense of the fluidity between literacy and domesticity, as she weaves literate activities into the fabric of her domestic routine. She claimed that "sewing won't make my fortune, but I can plan my stories while I work and scribble 'em down on Sundays" (67). In describing her writing process Alcott also used metaphors of domesticity, frequently likening the planning process of her writing to "simmering" or "spinning my brains out" and calling her written products her children. As she explained in a journal entry about her literary "children" and

her sister's children: "I sell my children and though they feed me, they don't love me as hers do" (160). It is also clear from comments such as these that like mothering and domestic chores, reading and writing were intensely private and physical experiences for Alcott. Like Harriet Jacobs's experience in the chrysalis, Alcott found solace and power in her experiences of literary isolation. As frequently, she also experienced pain in the process of moving out of that independent solace, pain that was frequently caused by her efforts to negotiate the social mores of the nineteenth century.

Judith Fetterley has described the doubleness of Alcott's literary career as a civil war between femininity and creativity. In Fetterley's estimation, Alcott's career represents a forced (and in Fetterley's way of understanding, distinctly negative) compromise imposed by external demands which severely limited Alcott's artistic possibilities. Elaine Showalter gives a similar reading of *Little Women*, calling it "one of the best studies we have of the literary daughter's dilemma: the tension between female obligation and artistic freedom" (ix) that kept Alcott from "fulfilling her literary promise" (ix). As with the other writers discussed in this study, however, the boundaries between public/private, domesticity/literacy, economics/aesthetics, femininity/masculinity, self/other are constantly blurred in Alcott's life and work. In using this kind of duality to describe Alcott, I fear that our critical conversations have created false oppositions between literacy and domesticity, like those which characterizes our discussions about literacy and slavery when literacy is typically seen in terms of the opposition between freedom and enslavement. As the chrysalis metaphor and the literary mothering of Harriet Jacobs and Ruth Hall have illustrated, femininity and creativity, mothering and writing are not necessarily in opposition but are more likely experienced as two constantly shifting manifestations of literacy.

Critics also talk of Alcott's split personality when discussing her ability to shift between writing lurid thrillers and moral tales for children. This genre-shifting is typically read as a conflict between Alcott's creative desires and her female responsibilities. Showalter argues that Alcott remained torn between her identity as a writer and an ethic of female self-sacrifice, citing Alcott's close relationship with her mother as an indication that "she was never able to break away from her mother to forge an independent life" (x). Ann Douglas argues that Alcott was "blocked" by this conflict which caused a "steady decline" in her later work (234). The underlying assumption in these critical analyses is that Alcott's compromise was not a conscious choice, but was instead a forced loss of her artistic integrity. The fact that Alcott ceased to write thrillers after the publication of *Little Women* is read by Douglas as a capitulation to outside authority. It is assumed by Douglas that rebellion against audience demands would have been a preferable choice for Alcott.

I, however, want to use Ann Douglas's discussion to reconsider the shifts in Alcott's literacy in light of the previous arguments made in this study about the process of developing literateness. According to Douglas, deception is the focal point of Alcott's early writing. She argues that "deception requires an intense effort of the will, a constant vigilante hunt mounted against the emotions [which] suggests a paralyzed tension between the desire for omnipotence and the fear of rejection, the twin fueling process of the will" (237). This description of Alcott sounds a lot like my previous discussions of deception in the literate experiences of Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass and of the deceptive nature of the chrysalis. Douglas adds that Alcott could not "sustain the inner strain" of writing sensational fiction and instead turned "more or less permanently from sensationalist novels to the even more lucrative and certainly safer juvenile market" (237). This understanding of the

shift in Alcott's career sees the movement in genres as a kind of escape to a safer, less conflicted ground which is reflected in Alcott's characters. "The sensational characters exist in a painful and creative solitude; their only real links to society are conspiratorial. In later works, Alcott's little folks are seldom alone. They can never free themselves from what seems like a claustrophobically communal atmosphere" (241).

In my way of understanding this shift, the movement from solitude to community does not represent paralysis, but rather reflects a developing literateness and a gradual understanding of the interdependence of isolation and community. Alcott's ability write different kinds of texts for different purposes and different audiences doesn't necessarily indicate a loss of artistic integrity or a capitulation to outside sources. Douglas's argument sounds a lot like those put forth by critics of the slave narrative who argue that writers like Frederick Douglass were "enslaved" by the form of the slave narrative and the expectations of a white audience. Alcott's development as a writer is more likely understandable as a normal experience of literacy maturation. In her emergence from the chrysalis Alcott moves from the pseudonymous hiding and deception of sensation writing to a more public authorship which brought with it many painful moral and financial responsibilities--hallmarks of literary adulthood and a sophisticated literacy. This shift illustrates the kind of super- or metaliteracy practiced by Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs: their ability to master many levels of discourse and to shift their literate activities depending upon the circumstances.

In both the private and public chronicles of her developing literacy, Louisa May Alcott echoes all the stories examined in this study thus far: from the obedience training of Ellen Montgomery to the painful economic independence of Ruth Hall to the "chrysalis patterns" of Harriet Jacobs to the

oral and communal dimension of Frederick Douglass's literacy. Her journals paint a portrait of a dutiful and obedient young girl who grew into a creative (albeit overworked) artist who possessed the ability to shift her literate activities according to economic need and her internal desires. Alcott's career as a writer simultaneously follows a path away from secrecy and disobedience to a sense of domestic literacy. Alcott's career is thus a palimpsest of the literate experiences of Harriet Jacobs, Fanny Fern and Susan Warner. Both Alcott's fictional and nonfictional literacy narratives reveal the maturation of a writer from literary childhood to the responsibility of literary motherhood.<sup>1</sup>

*Little Women* (1868) is the fictionalized and rather idealized story of that literary development. Alcott's autobiographical novel, which closely echoes the writer's literate experiences, is a chronicle of Jo March's development as a writer. It illustrates Jo's struggle to construct a sense of self that allows her to forge a workable literary identity. In this struggle Jo gradually begins to see her writing and reading not in opposition to, but as an extension of other activities she performs as a member of the March family. Certainly Alcott was aware of the literary choices made by her contemporary Susan Warner, for eighteen years after *The Wide, Wide, World* became a nationwide bestseller, the experience of reading the novel was woven into the fabric of *Little Women*. In the chapter titled "An Experiment" Josephine March escapes from her domestic duties to spend "the afternoon reading and crying over 'The Wide, Wide, World,' up in the apple tree" (109). Alcott's superimposition of her literacy narrative upon Warner's story invites a comparison between the literate activities governing the life of Ellen Montgomery and the many literacies functioning in the lives of Alcott's little women. That Jo is even reading Warner's novel immediately differentiates her from Ellen Montgomery, who had little access to fictional texts because of John Humphreys' censorship.

But the fact that Jo is crying as she reads Ellen's story indicates that Jo is sensitive to Ellen's struggles with a rebellious nature, perhaps because Ellen's troubles are her own in many ways. As children, the conflict between literary duty and literary desire is paramount in the lives of these two heroines.

Jo March and her sisters make attempts similar to Ellen's efforts at textual submission when they each receive a copy of what was Ellen's favorite text, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, from Mrs. March as a Christmas gift. Jo "knew it very well, for it was that beautiful old story of the best life ever lived, and [she] felt it was a true guide-book for any pilgrim going along the long journey" (12). Meg agrees, claiming that "Mother wants us to read and love and mind these books, and we must begin at once . . . I shall keep my book on the table here, and read a little every morning as soon as I wake, for I know it will do me good, and help me through the day" (12-13). In the first chapter of the novel, "Playing Pilgrims," the children remember acting out their own version of the story and Marmee reminds them that "it is a play we are playing all the time in one way or another. Our burdens are here, our road before us, and the longing for goodness and happiness is the guide that leads us through many troubles and mistakes to the peace which is a true Celestial City" (10). Marmee's words indicate the way in which that text will serve as the "guidebook" for the lives of Alcott's characters and also as the allegorical framework for the novel as a whole. The text provides the organizing metaphor for many of the little women's individual struggles, indicated in such chapter titles such as "Burdens," "Castles in the Air," "Amy's Valley of Humiliation" and "Jo Meets Apollyon." The fact that the March family acts out the story and thus transforms a private literate experience into a shared oral performance creates a sense of community and a common bond among the family members which differentiates the experience from Ellen's shutting herself inside her

closet to read. In this sense, the novel immediately begins to blur the boundaries between acts of literacy and orality by transforming the isolating activity of reading into communal performances such as storytelling and playacting. Alcott even refers to the story itself as a drama at the close of Part I, which she ends by closing the curtain on the “first act of the domestic drama called ‘Little Women’” (235).<sup>2</sup>

The continuities between dramatic performances and literary works is a topic taken up by Stephen Railton. Railton reads many works of the American Renaissance as performances. Using a social constructionist view, Railton sees the literary text as occurring in the space between the individual writer and her audience, calling to mind the kind of interactive literacy practiced by the March family. Railton describes the paradox of writing as both the pleasure of solitary creation and the trauma of publication. Since the American writer’s quest for identity is peculiarly dependent upon the responses of his audience, Railton argues that nineteenth-century American writers were obsessed with audience. Seen in Railton’s framework, the storytelling and playacting of the March family provide a comfortable antidote to the “trauma” of publication which is echoed in Alcott’s own journal comments. She writes in her journal about the pleasures of reading her novel to her family: “So I had a good time, even if it never comes to anything; it was worth something to have my dearest three sit up till midnight listening with wide eyes to Lu’s first novel” (102). In this kind of participatory environment, the “family audience” is not only sympathetic to the performer, but becomes part of the writer’s experience of the text.

Robert Stepto’s discussion of African-American writers also has particular relevance in this context. According to Stepto, African-American writers needed to learn how to write for unreliable audiences. The resulting



“distrust of the reader” caused a paradigm shift in African-American literature from story writing to storytelling, from written to oral models of discourse. This shift required audiences to assume the responsibilities of listening, hence making the act of reading a more social, less competitive activity. Railton’s and Stepto’s critical models of the relationship between a writer and her audience allow us to see continuities between Alcott’s domestic model of literacy and the concerns of other writers of the nineteenth century. These insights also enable us to see that the March family literacy provides a model that eventually helps Jo to negotiate many of the conflicts of publication.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to the communal and oral aspect of the March family literacy, the family’s efforts to model their lives after Bunyan’s 1684 text also indicate that their understanding of literacy is not unlike Ellen Montgomery’s efforts to deny her own desires and to submit herself to religious textual authority. Each little woman has her own standard of obedience and her own rebellious impulse that she struggles to deny: Jo tries to subdue her dreadful temper; Amy’s vanity gets her into trouble; Meg is too fond of luxury and Beth, the painfully shy child, laments her lack of a piano. Aware of their faults, the children rely on their moral guide-book to help organize their life goals. Beth orders the events of her life by “thinking about the ‘Pilgrim’s Progress’.” She explains that “we got out of the Slough and through the Wicked Gate by resolving to be good, and up the steep hill, by trying.” She imagines that “the [Laurence] house, . . . full of splendid things, is going to be our Palace Beautiful” (57). Amy also gets her strength from a book of moral lessons, one of which reads: “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” Her response to that text is to chastise herself, claiming “I ought, but I don’t.” But “her conscience preached her a little sermon from that text, then and there; and she did what many of us don’t always do--she took the sermon to heart, and straightforward put it in

practice" (303). Meg does likewise, understanding the family's kindness to the poverty-stricken Hummel family by quoting the same Biblical text: "That's loving our neighbor better than ourselves, and I like it" (16). At the same time, however, the art of storytelling is also a central element in the family moral training. The girls listen to stories told by their mother for lessons on how to become better pilgrims. Marmee even tricks the girls by turning a session of storytelling into a moral lesson. Meg exclaims, "Now Marmee, that is very cunning of you to turn our own stories against us, and give us a sermon instead of a spin." Jo agrees, claiming that "we needed that lesson and we won't forget it. If we do, you just say to us as Old Chloe did in Uncle Tom,--"Tink ob yer marcies chillen, tink ob yer marcies'" (45).<sup>4</sup> In the interpretive community of the March family the boundaries between reading and mothering blur as each daughter uses her own chosen text as a substitute moral authority to reinforce Marmee's story-lessons.

Richard Brodhead reads scenes such as these as evidence of the novel's philosophy of disciplinary intimacy in which the intimate acts of reading and storytelling supersede the act of mothering.

The little women of Alcott's famous first novel live, as the domestic manuals of the previous generation would prescribe, within a loving parental presence, in an enclosed family space warmed by maternal affection and so oriented toward the mother's beliefs. This enveloping presence, operating without the aid of overt or physical coercion, has the power almost magically to mold character in the direction of parental ideals, to transpose parental presence into an imperative from within. (71)

When Jo's references to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or Beth's quoting from the *Pilgrim's Progress* take the place of Marmee's moral lessons, we see an interpenetration of the written text and the voice of the mother. This fluidity between textual representation and performative immanence humanizes the

literary moral training of Alcott's little women and differentiates it from the obedience training of Warner's Ellen Montgomery. Motherless Ellen is repeatedly left alone with her religious texts and no interpretive authority of her own. From the mother's perspective, disciplinary intimacy achieved through the experience of reading does not create an opposition between literacy and domestic responsibility but instead conceives of literacy as an essential part of the domestic sphere.

Jo choice of a fictional text, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and her ability to quote directly from Stowe's novel to reinforce her mother's message indicates that she has not only read widely in both the religious and popular texts of her day but that she has the ability to see similar moral messages in different kinds of texts and to also understand the differences between "a sermon and a spin." In other words, Jo is a sophisticated reader with the ability to make critical distinctions between texts. This ability allows her to use one fictional text as a moral guide and to simultaneously read others for pure enjoyment without also reading herself into the romantic plot. For example, Jo "rather scorned romance, except in books "(142), and we know she rejects the romance Laurie offers her. She is able to separate the romantic plot from her own life experiences. And even though she repeatedly claims to hate sentimentality, Jo does cry over *The Wide, Wide World*. Moreover, she "like[s] adventures" (46) and seems to most identify with her reading of the heroes in adventure stories, or their horses: "I wish I was a horse; then I could run for miles in this splendid air and not lose my breath" (152). For Jo, the experience of reading has a multiplicity of effects: it is alternately a means of becoming a more submissive little woman or a means of dealing with a painful reality or simply an avenue of escape into the world of her imagination. In much the same way that Frederick Douglass and Linda Brent alternately submitted and resisted

through literate acts, Jo both submits and resists as a reader depending upon the text and circumstances.

At the same time, Jo frequently compares life to novel plots. When the unfamiliar prospect of romantic love becomes a reality through Meg's relationship with John Brooke, Jo also use her fictional texts as means of helping her to order her experience even when--as Harriet Jacobs finds with the sentimental novel--that means rejecting fictional conventions as unsuitable for her own experience. For example, when she and Marmee try to assess Meg's feelings for John Brooke, Jo exclaims "Mercy me! I don't know anything about love, and such nonsense! . . . In novels, the girls show it by starting and blushing, fainting away, growing thin, and acting like fools. Now Meg don't do anything of the sort; she eats and drinks and sleeps, like a sensible creature" (202). In this textual reference, Jo is using conventions of the romance to shed light on Meg's actions, but she is also offering up a criticism of the "girls" in those novels. By labeling their actions as "foolish," she asserts her own interpretive authority, something which Linda Brent and Ruth Hall repeatedly do and which Ellen Montgomery is never able to do. Meg also uses books as a point of comparison, claiming about John's affection for her: "I felt like the girls in books" (208). And when the two sisters discuss Meg's potential romance, Jo complains to her sister that "[i]f [John] goes on like the rejected lovers in books, you'll give in, rather than hurt his feelings" (227). Indeed, Mr. Brooke does look to Meg "decidedly more like those novel heroes whom she admired" (229). Alcott's narrative voice describes the wedding itself as a time when the "fresh-faced, happy-hearted girls, paus[ed] a moment in their busy lives to read with wistful eyes the sweetest chapter in the romance of womanhood" (250). Father and Mother also render their romance with a textual metaphor, as they "sat together quietly re-living the first chapter of the romance which for them

began some twenty years ago" (235).

At the end of chapter III I discussed the way that either physical or metaphorical isolation can create a space for women which allows them to transcend oppressive experiences. Barbara Sicherman's case study of novel reading in late-Victorian American reinforces the similar sense that Alcott's novel creates, of reading as a means of providing "physical, temporal and psychological" (202) space for women to imagine overcoming the limitations of gender and class. She argues that "in a world full of social constraints, . . . reading [was associated] with freedom and possibility" (208). As Jo's and Meg's conversations about John Brooke indicate, books "provided a common language and a medium of intellectual and social exchange that helped women define themselves and formulate responses to the larger world" with fiction providing "a rehearsal for future experience . . . a reference point" for past experience, and a "range of possible responses" to personal developments (209), thus creating a reciprocal relation--a continuum between fiction and life. "If fiction was a referent for people one encountered in real life, life also cast light on fiction" (210), explains Sicherman. Jo's desire to be a man, like the male heroes of the books she reads, as well as her rejection of the marriage plot, illustrates the way that reading "affords a scope for female agency" (217) as much as it provides a map for feminine submission.

Unlike the muffling of dialogism which is typical of Ellen's literacy, Jo experiences a "fluidity of boundaries between fiction and life" (210). To use Bakhtin's language, she is able to infuse authoritative discourse with her own internally persuasive discourse in a constant dialectic. Jo makes it very clear that while she loves reading romances and frequently talks about her life as if it were a plot in a novel, she is able to resist and revise fictional plots to suit her own nature and her own desires. Her ability to negotiate among different kinds

of texts, to alternate being textual submission and independence, is a precursor to a larger conflict in the novel between Jo's boyish instincts and the prevailing social script for women, a struggle in which Jo's literacy plays a central role.

Even though Jo's love of reading frequently helps her become a better pilgrim, it also has the potential to put her at odds with her domestic responsibilities. For example, Jo's experience of reading Warner's novel takes place in a chapter in which all of the March girls forsake their domestic duties for a full week of leisure. Jo "laid up a pile of books" and planned to "improve [her] shining hours reading in [her] perch in the old apple-tree" (109). The result of this complete abandonment of domestic duties is the loss of Pip, Beth's canary, who dies from neglect. The lesson learned from the experiment is one of balance. As Mrs. March explains: "it is better to have a few duties, and live a little for others" (117). In other words, like other purely self-indulgent activities, reading has potentially dangerous ramifications for women, not only because it may corrupt the mind but because it isolates the individual and cuts her off from a sense of female responsibility. Reading fiction is also not "work" in the sense the Marmee explains "work is wholesome, and . . . it keeps us from ennui and mischief; is good for health and spirits, and gives us a sense of power and independence better than money or fashion" (118). However, reading *The Pilgrim's Progress* and moral fiction such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* does seem to fulfill Marmee's definition of work. Here, Marmee articulates the tension between the potential isolation and passivity of reading fiction and the active and selfless fulfillment of the domestic sphere as reinforced by reading moral tales, a similar tension Ellen's Aunt Fortune epitomized in *The Wide, Wide World*. Marmee doesn't censor Jo's fictional reading like John Humphreys does Ellen's, perhaps because she implicitly trusts Jo's own judgment. Marmee also understands the potentially creative life stories that reading

fiction provides for Jo, as well as the financial independence which can be achieved through authorship.

Several other scenes of Jo reading in her attic refuge illustrate a similar tension between feminine domesticity and masculine self-reliance, between the self-in-relationship and the self-in-isolation, tensions also experienced by Harriet Jacobs in her efforts to balance the interiority and exteriority of the chrysalis. For example, it is not unusual for Jo to disappear into the garret to her “favorite refuge; and here she loved to retire with a half a dozen russets and a nice book, to enjoy the quiet and society of a pet rat who lived nearby, and didn’t mind her a particle.” The image of Jo eating apples and crying over the ‘Heir of Redcliffe,’ “wrapped up in a comforter on an old three-legged sofa by the sunny window” (23) is interrupted by Meg’s plans for a New Year’s Party. Jo is entirely uninterested, responding to her sister: “Now go . . . and let me finish this splendid story” (24). This constant pattern of intrusion between her sister’s more social, feminine interests and Jo’s preference to be left alone reading, or writing, permeates the early part of the novel and further complicates Jo’s conflicted understanding of literacy, which she initially sees as being entirely in opposition to a social public identity. In the early pages of the novel bookish Jo is gradually and painfully introduced to the social sphere and its own complicated rules of conduct. Ruth Hall gets this same introduction when she marries into the family of Harry Hall and must submit to the tyranny of her in-laws. Both writers initially respond by submitting.

At home, Jo seems to understand fully the rules of social conduct. She is beloved by her sisters because she is full of adventurous stories. She is loud and outgoing and aggressive, being the actress of the family. But when Jo leaves the domestic sphere and enters into polite society, the very qualities which so endear her to her sisters are considered improper. She’s always

“possessed to burst out with some particularly blunt speech or revolutionary sentiment” (296) in a social situation in which subtlety and understatement are the norm. When Jo tries to “be agreeable . . . [and] imitate what is called a ‘charming girl’” (290), she ends up spinning lavish tales, because “[i]t’s funny and it amuses people” (293). Amy chastises Jo for not holding her tongue, but Jo seems truly confused about the mores of proper conversation, which include a whole host of unspoken rules like putting on airs. The language of polite society seems dishonest to Jo, who “like[s] big strong words that mean something” (36). She sees the conventions of class and polite society, particularly gossip, as a kind of fakery which she finds oppressive and deceptive, like slavery’s corruption of language: “So we are to countenance things and people which we detest, merely because we are not belles and millionaires, are we? That’s a nice sort of morality” (296). Ultimately, Jo clashes with polite society because of her conflicting understanding of language. For Jo, language is a means of self-expression, of imagination and of truth; in Amy’s social sphere, language is a tool of conformity, a means of denying the self in order to be accepted into the group.

Likewise, when Jo visits her Aunt March she hates socializing, preferring instead to slip away to read from the “wilderness of books, in which she could wander where she liked, ma[king] the library a region of bliss to her” (38). But Jo can only snatch moments of such bliss:

The moment Aunt March took her nap, or was busy with company, Jo hurried to this quiet place, and, curling herself up in the big chair, devoured poetry, romance, history, travels, and pictures, like a regular bookworm. But, like all happiness, it did not last long, for as sure as she had reached the heart of the story, the sweetest verse of the song, or the most perilous adventures of her traveler, a shrill voice called, ‘Josy-phine! Josy-phine!’ and she had to leave her paradise to wind yarn, wash the poodle, or read Belsham’s Essays, by the hour together. (38)



Belsham's Essays is the boring old text that Aunt March makes Jo read aloud to her, a dreadful kind of literate experience because it is governed by the rules of polite social discourse.

Jo's experience of writing recreates a similar conflict between the self-isolation and the self-in-relation. But Jo's family understands her need for privacy quite well. At the beginning of Chapter 27, titled "Literary Lessons," Alcott paints a portrait of Jo isolated from the responsibilities of a busy family life, and immersed in the intellectual activity of writing:

Every few weeks she would shut herself up in her room, put on her scribbling suit and "fall into a vortex," as she expressed it, writing away at her novel with all her heart and soul, for till that was finished she could find no peace . . . when the writing fit came on, she gave herself up to it with entire abandon, and led a blissful life, unconscious of want, care or bad weather, while she sat safe and happy in her imaginary world, full of friends almost as real to her and dear to her as any in the flesh. Sleep forsook her eyes, meals stood untasted, day and night were all too short to enjoy the happiness which blessed her only at such times, and made these hours worth living, even if they bore no other fruit. The divine afflatus usually lasted a week or two, and then she emerged from her "vortex" hungry, sleepy, cross or despondent. (265-66)

Jo's family members know enough to "[keep] their distance, merely popping in their heads occasionally, to ask, with interest, 'Does genius burn, Jo?'" (265). By stealing away from her family responsibilities to pursue the inspirational abandon of her vortex, Jo assumes an air of masculine self-reliance.<sup>5</sup> Alcott creates the sense that Jo is literally transformed through her experience of writing, her "divine afflatus" allowing her to experience a kind of "spontaneity" or "instinct" of the inner soul. The isolation and internal inspiration of Jo's afflatus illustrates romantic myth of the isolated individual receiving inspiration from an internal source. The sheer joy of Jo's experience of the imagination and of the creative spirit is recognizable to any writer who has shared a similar experience. And the happiness Jo experiences in her writing is

akin to her paradise of reading. A similar kind of spontaneity occurs within the March's domestic community in the many many hours of storytelling, dramatic performance, picnicking, dancing and word games which fill up the girls' time. These forms of entertainment engage the same creative powers of the imagination as does Jo's divine afflatus. But instead of being isolating, they build a strong community among the girls and enable them to work together for a common goal and a form of intimacy.

At the same time, the violence of Jo's literate experience, the notion of falling, of entire abandon, of having a "fit," sounds a lot like the powerful anger which Jo sees as her primary character flaw. For example, of all the little women, she has the least "self-control." She has a "fiery temper" which always gets her into trouble and her sister claims she likes to "get into a fury" (74). Jo "cherished her anger till it grew strong, and took possession of her" (77). The "the sharp words fly out before I know what I'm about," (80) she claims. To any writing teacher, that could be an apt description of the process of freewriting, but the kind of emotional energy which fuels Jo in her isolated writing fit is a great evil to be subdued in her interactions with others. Within the family circle, the "sweetness of self-denial and self-control" outweighs the passion of literary creativity. The difficulty for Jo is to find some acceptable way to bring the creative passion and fire of her vortex into her life outside of the attic, since such unbridled passion is at odds with her little womanness.

Jo's pattern of shutting herself up in her room, finding refuge in the garret, or stealing away to her apple tree to lose herself in intellectual activity, allows her to achieve the isolation necessary for the literary process. Her blissfulness in these activities echoes Marmee's ideas about the pleasures of work. This anti-social image of Jo, locked away in her garret amid the domestic activities of the rest of the March family, also brings to life masculine notions

of work.

In many other ways, Jo's character seems to reflect models of masculinity. Her dark hair and her masculine name, her role as man of the March family in her father's absence and her rebellious nature all set Jo apart from her ladylike sisters. Jo expresses disappointment at not being a boy, while imploring her sisters not to "try and make me grow up before my time" (23). Jo also isn't shy about expressing her genuine feelings:

‘I ain’t [a young lady]! and if turning up my hair makes me one, I’ll wear it in two tails till I’m twenty . . . I hate to think I’ve got to grow up and be Miss March, and wear long gowns and look as prim as Chinaster. It’s bad enough to be a girl anyway, when I like boy’s games and work, and manners. I can’t get over my disappointment at not being a boy, and it’s worse than ever now for I’m dying to go and fight with papa and I can only stay home and knit like a poky old woman. (3)

Moreover, Jo prefers to please herself rather than dress, speak and act according to the latest fashion. She has no patience with such superficial social affairs as New Year's parties or the practice of calling upon neighbors. She "never troubled herself much about dress" (24) and Jo doesn't "care what people say" (24) about her. She prefers to follow internal, not external guidance. As Amy charges of her, "You don't care to make people like you, to go into good society and cultivate your manners and tastes" (259). Among all the little women, Jo is set apart from feminine conventions and the discourse of polite society, as is obvious in her remarks when Amy plans a party with her schoolmates:

‘Why in the world should you spend your money, worry your family, and turn the house upside down for a parcel of girls who don’t care a sixpence for you? I thought you had too much pride and sense to truckle to any mortal woman just because she wears French boots and rides in a coupe,’ said Jo, who, being called from the tragic climax of her novel, was not in the best mood for social enterprises. (259)

As her comments illustrate, when Jo leaves her garret and returns to the domestic and social sphere, her qualities of masculinity clash with the superficial demands of true little womanhood. Her sharp words to Aunt Carol and Aunt March in Chapter 29, "Calls"-- "I don't like favors; they oppress and make me feel like a slave; I'd rather do everything for myself, and be perfectly independent"-- assure us that Jo does not repress her feelings. But she is forced to pay a price for such bluntness. Her words "deprived her of several years of pleasure, and she received a timely lesson in the art of holding the tongue" (297). Throughout the novel, Jo continues to love to write because writing gives her control over circumstances she does not have in real life and allows her to use language in the way she prefers. She explains to Meg:

'Oh, don't I wish I could fix things for you as I do for my heroines . . . I'd have some rich relation leave you a fortune unexpectedly; (which is exactly what Alcott does do for her own heroine, Jo) then you'd dash out as an heiress, scorn everyone who has slighted you, go abroad, and come home my Lady Something, in a blaze of splendor and elegance.' (157)

Jo's desire to change reality the way she constructs fictional plots, gets her into scrapes because the very qualities which make her a natural storyteller, her "love of good, strong words" and her fiery personality, are unacceptable in polite society. Such qualities also make it difficult to subdue her Apollyon and conform to the proper standard of female behavior. While her rebellious nature feels natural to Jo, it is labeled by Marmee as her "bosom enemy" (80). And as self-reliant as literate Jo is, she is still eager to conform for the good of her family, and so she learns to bite her tongue when she feels the desire to be spontaneous in her language or actions with others. She struggles to be "a little woman and not be rough and wild, but do my duty here instead of wanting to be somewhere else" (9). On the one hand, conformity is expected in Jo's social circle and dependence is inherent in her domestic identity as daughter, sister,

and mother. On the other hand, masculine individuality, which is enacted in the experience of her writing fit, is unattainable without rejecting obedience and submission, achieved in isolation from her family. As a young girl, Jo is caught between the extremes of masculinity and femininity, between the necessity of cooperation and compromise and the desire for isolation. On a linguistic level, self-reliance is also dangerous because it fails to acknowledge the role of audience in the rhetorical act. As previous experiences of literateness have illustrated, a delicate balance between the desires of the writer and the demands of the audience, between rebellion and submission, must be achieved for literacy to effect change.

Jo's domestic identity makes her efforts to be self-reliant difficult. Jo's experience of writing, as I mentioned, does seem to allow her to cut herself off from the social sphere and to thus channel her individualism in an acceptable manner. But the dangers inherent in such choices are clearly evident in the novel. For example, the first time Jo chooses to put her literate desires ahead of her family duties, Pip dies from neglect. The second time, when she remains angry at Amy for burning her precious book, Amy nearly drowns because Jo is blinded by her anger. And the third time, when charity calls and Jo refuses to visit the Hummels with Beth because she is too busy writing, Beth comes down with the scarlet fever that ultimately kills her. In the life of a little woman, living for oneself without a larger sense of responsibility for other has dangerous repercussions. Choosing literate activities over domestic responsibility means at worst, the possibility of losing someone close to you, though in choosing literacy over charity Jo does protect herself from potential death. And using the language of self-reliance in polite society can cost you a trip to Europe.

When Jo's literacy moves from being a private experience to a public

one, when she begins to emerge from the chrysalis, to publish her stories and receive recognition for her talents, a similar conflict emerges between conformity and individuality because she must again confront the vagaries of audience. She struggles with conflicts similar to those experienced by Douglass, Jacobs and Fern and Warner in assessing and negotiating audience expectations. At the same time, Jo moves even further beyond the domestic and social spheres into the public sphere of the marketplace, which also has different rules. At first, Jo writes because she enjoys it, because it is a means of escape from the world at large. But her writing gradually becomes a primarily economic activity and a road into the real world, as opposed to being avenue of spiritual elevation. Jo writes her first sensational story for the hundred dollar prize, trying to copy what she knew of similar kinds of stories. At this early stage of her literary development, Jo relies on stylistic conventions and stock plots, the kind of “copying” which characterized Frederick Douglass’s first efforts at writing.

Publishing her writing allows Jo to earn nice sums of money to help support the family and thus fulfill the manly role she so desires. She earned several “delightful checks . . . and began to feel power in the house; for by the magic of the pen, her rubbish turned into comforts for them all. ‘The Duke’s Daughter’ paid the butcher’s bill, ‘A Phantom Hand’ put down a new carpet, and ‘The Curse of the Coventrys’ proved the blessing of the Marches in the way of groceries and gowns” (269). For a time though, Jo confuses the money she gets for writing the “trash” dictated by the tastes of her editors, with the “spiritual capital” (139) she gains through the process of writing. In other words, the self-reliant act of writing becomes subjugated to literacy as a commodity, to the need for her stories to conform to the demands of her readers and editors. Louisa May Alcott’s own journals illustrate how

completely she was overcome by economic motives. Her entries in later years consist of little more than a ledger of how much she earned by writing. Many times the kind of writing she did was dictated by how quickly it could be done and how much of a return it would provide. In May of 1860 she writes, "being tired of novels . . . I soon fell back on rubbishy tales, for they pay best and I can't afford to starve on praise, when sensation stories are written in half the time and keep the family cosey" (135). Faced with a choice between aesthetics and economics, between submission and independence, Alcott alternately chose both economic independence and literary submission and she did so both for her own satisfaction and for motherlike reasons--to support her family.

Jo's faces similar choices. Her first novel gets so convoluted in the process of editing it to fit the tastes of her various readers that it no longer constitutes her own work. Her publishers want her to cut it down one third and eliminate all the parts she particularly liked. Meg thinks she should not leave a word out of it. Amy suggests she do exactly what the editor says: "Make a good, popular book, and get as much money as you can. By and by, when you have got a name, you can afford to digress" (270). Father advises she "let it wait and ripen" (269). Marmee suggests she listen to her editors and Beth just wants to see it printed, soon. Jo is faced with a series of choices between conformity or self-reliance, with selling out for the most money for her family or being true to her artistic self. Like Alcott, she decides that "Fame is a very good thing to have in the house, but money is more convenient" (269). And so the demands of the marketplace overcome her literary genius. "With Spartan firmness, the young authoress laid her firstborn on the table, and chopped it up as ruthlessly as any ogre. In the hope of pleasing everyone she took everyone's advice, and like the old man and his donkey in the fable, pleased nobody" (270). She got three hundred dollars for it, but in the process, Jo conforms so closely

to outside voices that “[she doesn’t] know whether [she has] written a promising book, or broken all the ten commandments!” (270). All of Jo’s confusion allows her to conclude that she should have “printed it whole, or not at all, for I do hate to be so horribly misjudged” (271).

Jo’s difficulties in negotiating the conflicting demands of her audience indicate that she has not yet developed the sophisticated strategies as a writer that she has clearly shown as a reader. Jo is in a situation similar to other marginalized writers who are faced with several authoritative discourses which contradict each other. She has been able to draw critically from various texts in her reading, to read a variety of texts for various purposes and to feel comfortable with the process of negotiating among different kinds of authoritative discourses. But that ability to construct a multi-voiced metatext from her reading, a text which helps her to order her world, has not yet translated into her acts of writing. Like the rhetorical conflict Frederick Douglass experienced later in his later years when speaking to an audience of academics (when he momentarily places himself into the position of echoing the words of the master or being the ventriloquist for the abolitionists), Jo responds to her conflict by fully submitting to the demands of her audience. This initial attempt to simultaneously speak to multiple readers leads to a loss of control over her own literate acts, just as Douglass experienced when he “got the scholar bee in [his] bonnet.”

When Jo moves to New York to escape Laurie’s romantic plot, her lessons in literacy are continued by Professor Bhaer. Their blossoming romance is mediated by their common love of language. Jo is attracted to the Professor because of his fatherly qualities. He has a wonderful sense of affection for children, especially little Tina. Even though he is poor, Professor Bhaer has a “strong voice” and a charitable heart, giving lessons in order to



help support his two little orphan nephews. Moreover, Elaine Showalter points out that “Bhaer is unconfined by American codes of masculinity . . . and that he possesses all of the feminine attributes that . . . men could acquire in a rational, feminist world” (xxvii). Initially, Jo becomes involved with Professor Bhaer in a way that combines the literate and the domestic, the act of ‘righting’ and ‘writing,’ when she goes into his room to help clean up the horrible mess that Bhaer has created. She “put [his] books to rights,” (340) and “got his things in order, and knit heels into two pairs of [his] socks” (341). As a return favor, Professor Bhaer gives Jo lessons in German. Their relationship is thus formed around an intermingling of language and domesticity. When Jo gets “stuckfast in a grammatical bog” (341) Bhaer responds to her frustration by rescuing her from the grammar and sitting gown to read aloud together, thus turning a literate activity into a social one. Jo explains: “After that we got on better, and now I read my lessons pretty well; for this way of studying suits me, and I can see that the grammar gets tucked into the tales and poetry, as one give pills on jelly. I like it very much” (342). Bhaer gives Jo books, including a Shakespeare, inscribed with her name in it, and a good message:

‘You say you wish you had a library; here I gif you one; for between these two lids (he meant covers) is many books in one. Read him well, and he will help you much; for the study of character in this book will help you to read it in the world, and paint it with your pen.’ (243)

Bhaer’s remarks in his inscription speak directly to Jo’s love of literacy, her use of texts to help her read the world, and her desire to paint with her pen. In doing so, Professor Bhaer is beginning to eliminate the distinctions in Jo’s world between the domestic and social sphere, between literate and oral discourses and perhaps, between reality and romance. He allows her to see the possibility that in being a little women, she can express her individuality through literacy

while also providing an important social role.<sup>6</sup>

The chapter "Friend," which follows directly after the chapter in which Jo forms her friendship with Bhaer, is an important and complicated series of events in Jo's literate development. Even though she had earlier decided that she wouldn't write solely for money, the desire to help out her family re-emerges. Again, self-expression and charity collide:

The purpose which now took possession of her was a natural one to a poor and ambitious girl; but the means she took to her ends were not the best. She saw that money conferred power; money and power, therefore, she resolved to have; not to be used for herself alone, but for those she loved more than self. The dream of filling home with comforts, giving Beth everything she wanted, from strawberries in winter to an organ in her bedroom; going abroad herself, and always having more than enough, so she she might indulge in the luxury of charity, had been for years Jo's most cherished castle in the air. (345)

Jo writes for the money, again. This time she writes sensation stories with a few moral reflections, which she keeps a secret from everyone and publishes anonymously. And again, the editors again ask Jo to strike out all the moral reflections. "Feeling as a tender parent might on being asked to cut off her baby's legs in order that it might fit into a new cradle" (347) Jo agrees to cut her stories, then quickly pockets the twenty five dollars. As she "takes a plunge into the frothy sea of sensational literature," (349) Jo has a vague sense that this kind of writing would not meet with her parents' approval, but she keeps writing and in the process she "desecrates some of the womanliest attributes of a woman's character . . . She was living in bad society; and, imaginary though it was, its influence affected her, for she was feeding heart and fancy on dangerous and unsubstantial food, and was fast brushing the innocent bloom from her nature by a premature acquaintance with the darker side of life" (349). This description makes it sound as if Jo's writing is a fall

from honor, an act similar to self-prostitution. It echoes the lesson Jo learned when she loses out on the trip to Europe: words, even written ones, have the capacity to control her reality and her identity and to a certain extent a writer's reality is controlled by her audience. It is at this point that the literateness of Jo March and Louisa May Alcott begin to diverge, for Jo stops writing, but Alcott continued to write popular moral tales primarily for financial reasons. In other words, Jo chooses to adhere to the authoritative discourse of propriety over the internally persuasive discourse of economics and self-expression while Alcott privileges the internally persuasive discourse of economics over the internally persuasive discourse of self-expression.

Fortunately for the little woman, Professor Bhaer, the "poor language-master" (351) throws her a life preserver. "I don't know whether the study of Shakespeare helped her to read character, or the natural instinct of a woman for what was honest, brave, and strong; but while endowing her imaginary heroes with every perfection under the sun, Jo was discovering a life hero, who interested her in spite of many human imperfections" (350). Professor Bhaer's advice was to "study simple, true and lovely characters, wherever she found them, as good training for a writer" (350). At the same time, Jo's entrance into literary society is so much like her entrance into polite social society that her experience "rapidly dispelled her romantic illusions" (351) about the distinguished writers and poets she had admired from afar. While these fallen idols "reasoned religion into nothingness" (352) and argued that the "intellect was to be the only God" (352), Professor Bhaer "defended religion with all the eloquence of truth--an eloquence that made his broken English beautiful . . . Somehow as he talked, the world got right again to Jo" (353). So when Professor Bhaer--who by this time had achieved greatness on Jo's eyes--criticizes the kinds of newspapers Jo has been writing for, claiming that "they

haf no right to put poison in the sugarplum and let the small ones eat it" (355), Jo takes a second look at her writing and at the meaning of independence.

After hearing Bhaer's words, Jo goes back to her room and carefully re-read every one of her stories. Being a little short-sighted, Mr. Bhaer sometimes used eyeglasses, and Jo had tried them on once, smiling to see how they magnified the fine print of her book; now she seemed to have got on the Professor's mental or moral spectacles also, for the faults of these poor stories glared at her dreadfully and filled her with dismay. (355-6)

The dynamics of this situation echo John Humphreys' censorship of Ellen's reading materials, but the important difference is that Jo is using her own judgment in reading her *own* stories and her decision about what to write is a reflection of her developing sense of self. Ellen, on the other hands, exercises no critical judgment about her own literacy. Her relationship with John is governed by metaphors of blindness, not the magnifying eyeglasses which characterize Jo's development.

Embarrassed at what she has resorted to, Jo burns all of her writing. However, she feels somewhat imprisoned by the renewed sense of moral responsibility inspired by Bhaer's guardianship, perhaps because she has not yet figured out how to reconcile the pleasures of writing with her sense of social responsibility. Jo seems glad she has such guardians "to hedge [her] round with principles which may seem like prison walls to impatient youth, but which will prove sure foundations to build character upon in womanhood" (356), thus articulating the difference between literary childhood and her literary adulthood. With her newfound sense of moral responsibility, Jo sets out to write a "rightful" tale full of morals, but she realizes that in the economic marketplace "morals don't sell" (357). So Jo corks up her inkstand. But while "her pen lay idle, she was learning other lessons beside German, and laying a foundation for the sensation story of her own life" (357). The winter passes

with no books being written, but Jo's lessons from Professor Bhaer have laid the groundwork for the most important act of life-writing.

The turning point in Jo's life as a woman and her identity as a writer comes in the process of writing her second novel when she manages to infuse her literary isolation with the responsibilities of family as a result of her experiences during her sister Beth's illness. Jo's writing brings together her 'masculine' desire for individuality with her 'feminine' identity as a sister and surrogate mother. During Beth's confinement, Jo substitutes her attempts to support Beth by writing stories with her activities of mothering in Marmee's absence, remaining constantly at her sister's bedside. These were "[p]recious and helpful hours to Jo, for . . . her heart received the teaching that it needed, lessons in patience were so sweetly taught her, that she could not fail to learn them [and] . . . the loyalty to duty that makes the hardest easy, and the sincere faith that fears nothing, but trusts undoubtedly" (416). The chapter "All Alone" chronicles Jo's efforts to deal with the loss of her sister in a painful chrysalis period of isolation. In this chapter Jo rediscovers the importance of a balance between interiority and exteriority, between "living wholly from within" and of reconnecting with her family in order to gain literary guidance and inspiration. After becoming thoroughly confused by the contradictory responses to her first novel, Jo initially loses interest in writing. "I've no heart to write, and if I had, nobody cares for my things" (435). But she ultimately follows Marmee's directions to "never mind the rest of the world" (426) and to write from her heart for her family, making the writing of that novel much like the storytelling which brought the family together in earlier times. In this act of writing, Jo does not fall into the spiritual abandon of her vortex; rather she is simply "absorbed" (436). The wide reaching success of the resulting story amazes Jo. "[She] never knew how it happened, but something

got into that story that went straight to the hearts of all those who read it” (436). Mr. March explained that the allure of the story lay in its “truth. . . . [H]umor and pathos make it alive” (426).

An important difference “feminizes” this act of writing when compared to Jo’s early writing in the novel. In her vortex, Jo’s writing is an act of escape from her family as she locks herself away and turns inward for inspiration. She experiences an internal, almost violent whirlpool in which she is out of control. And when she writes solely for money, Jo gets lost in the demands of the marketplace. It is only after Beth’s death, in her struggle with grief, that Jo begins to combine the activities of her mind and the heart. Jo turns to her familial relationships and her sense of maternal responsibility for others as inspiration.

After Beth’s death, Jo writes, “taught by Love and sorrow” (436) at Marmee’s incitement, for her family. Jo embraces emotional connectedness and begins to see her literacy as connected to her family community. She integrates her sister-self with her writer-self. Her success at writing, the newfound spontaneity of the self-in-relation allows her to both “be independent and to earn the praise of those she loved” (156) proving that these are not mutually exclusive goals but two aspects of the same whole. In her writing about Beth, Jo finds she can follow the inspiration of her family. In doing so, she achieves individualism while also embracing emotional attachments. Her feminization of self-reliance does not preclude the love of family, nor the grief of loss. In fact, her newfound self-reliance requires that she be emotionally connected to the world in a permanent way. For Jo, the intimacy of her relationship with Professor Bhaer allows her to trust that such attention to feeling and intimacy can also provide literary inspiration.

From her experience of Beth’s death, Jo is reborn as a writer and as a

woman. Alcott's journals after her own sister's death echo a similar transformation. "I know what death means,-- a liberator for her, a teacher for us," (79) she explains. "A great grief has taught me more than any minister. I feel as if I could write better now,--more truly of things I have felt and therefore *know*. I hope I shall yet do my great book for that seems to be my work and I am growing up to it" (83). Alcott's own experience of grief enables her to grow into a writer who can write more truly. Ultimately, Jo has learned the same literary lesson that Frederick Douglass came to understand on the shores of the Chesapeake Bay. She learns about the importance of the spiritual in the literate act. She learns to privilege the spirit of the law over the written word of the law.

Meg characterizes Jo's literate transformation with a metaphor which mirrors Jacobs's chrysalis. She says of Jo: "You are like a chestnut burr, prickly outside, but silky-soft within, and a sweet kernel, if one can only get at it. Love will make you show your heart some day, and then the rough burr will fall off" (434). Jo initially rejects Meg's metaphor, claiming that "frost opens chestnut burrs . . . and it takes a good shake to bring them down. Boys go nutting, and I don't care to be bagged by them" (434). But Meg's metaphor and her model of domesticity combined with the loss of Beth enable Jo to imagine other possibilities.

Grief is the best opener for some hearts, and Jo's was nearly ready for the bag; a little more sunshine to ripen the nut, then, not a boy's impatient shake, but a man's hand reached up to pick it gently from the burr, and find the kernel sound and sweet. If she had suspected this, she would have shut up tight and been more prickly than ever; fortunately she wasn't thinking about herself, so when the time came, down she dropped, (435)

to be picked up by Professor Bhaer. In breaking free from the chestnut burr Jo's literary aspirations are ultimately superseded by maternal duty when she

marries. Immediately before her engagement to Bhaer, Jo scripts the plot of her life using the stereotypes she has accumulated in her reading, while commenting on their limitations:

‘An old maid--that’s what I’m to be. A literary spinster, with a pen for a spouse, a family of stories for children, and twenty years hence a morsel of fame, perhaps; when, like poor Johnson, I’m old and can’t enjoy it--solitary, and can’t share it, independent and don’t need it. Well, I needn’t be a sour saint or a selfish sinner; and I dare say, old maids are very comfortable when they get used to it; but--” and there Jo sighed, as if the prospect was not inviting.  
(440)

Jo’s sense of disappointment in the prospect of a career as a literary spinster reinforces what she has come to learn about the limitations of a self-reliant lifestyle, namely, that without companionship and love, independence can be lonely. Jo’s courtship with Professor Bhaer is described by Alcott as a literary exchange. While Professor Bhaer is “giving [Jo] lessons in love” (468), Jo gives Mr. Bhaer reading lessons, for “Mr. Bhaer could read several languages, but he had not learned to read women yet” (471). He finds the clue to understanding Jo through her poetry, in which “there was one little verse that seemed to call me” (476). He explains that “I read that and I think to myself, ‘She has a sorrow, she is lonely, she would find comfort in true love’” (479). In the process of sharing lessons in reading and writing, Bhaer, who was “more like a romantic student than a grave professor,” acknowledges to Jo that “your language is almost as beautiful as mine” (475). Jo’s marriage to Professor Bhaer offers a kind of reciprocity between their two languages and a fluidity between the emotional and the intellectual.

Moreover, Alcott goes out of her way to juxtapose Jo with the heroine of Warner’s sentimental novel, indirectly commenting on Ellen Montgomery’s saintly nature.

If [Jo] had been the heroine of a moral storybook, she ought at



this point in her life to have become quite saintly, renounced the world, and gone about doing good in a mortified bonnet, with tracts in her pocket. But you see Jo wasn't a heroine; she was only a struggling human girl, like hundreds of others, and she just acted out her nature, being sad, cross, listless or energetic as the mood suggested. (435)

With Mr. Bhaer's proposal, Jo "renounces old ambitions and pledge[s] herself to be a new and better wife" (418) to "her knight, thou he did not come prancing on a charger in gorgeous array" (479). I think Jo is pledging to be "a new and better wife" because Bhaer is not the typical romantic hero and because Jo has been able to imagine a revised marriage script in which motherhood and selflessness are not mutually exclusive of an independent mind, hence her claim to "carry my share and help to earn the home" (480). With her "duty and her work," Jo has not given up her independence for domesticity because her life as the mother of orphan boys is of the same essence as her experience as a writer. If writing sensation stories was a process of putting "poison in the sugarplum" then her experience at Plumfield, where the boys "feasted freely on forbidden plums," (485) is a natural and proper antidote. Jo continues to tell stories, though she trades in the "wilderness of books" for the "wilderness of boys" with "freedom being the best sauce loved by the boyish soul" (487). Her return to nature in the final chapter "Harvest" is a blossoming of all the seeds of knowledge she has been nurturing throughout the novel. And the supportive environment of her orphan school creates an atmosphere of 'righting' which make a natural complement to her writing career, just like she has constantly fixed Amy's "lapses of lingy" throughout the novel.

Moreover, while Jo sets her writing aside for a while to nurture her children, this decision does not seem like a loss because the novel itself does not ultimately privilege writing over other forms of expression. There are countless

scenes of oral intercourse, of storytelling, of family conversations and games, in which a performative interchange binds the family together in a way similar to Jo's literacy. The final scene of the novel privileges this shared oral discourse as Bhaer, the man of the big voice,

suddenly began to sing. Then, from above him, voice after voice took up the word, and from tree to tree echoed the music of the unseen choir, as the boys sung, with all their hearts, the little song Jo had written, Laurie set to music and the Professor trained his lads to give with the best effect, especially the little quadron, who had the sweetest voice of all. (488)

*Little Woman* has been criticized as Alcott's great compromise because though she wanted to keep Jo a literary spinster, Alcott responded to the demands of her audience to marry her off. But compromise and balance are at the center of Alcott's metaliteracy and at the center of any mature understanding of the world. And while Jo's marriage may be a disappointment to those who found inspiration in her childhood independence, Jo's married life is not a rejection of literary independence for ideal womanhood, but instead represents a revision of the marriage plot in presenting a more balanced, realistic representation of independence. As Jo herself explains, "the life I wanted then seems selfish, cold and lonely to me now. I haven't given up the hope that I may write a good book yet, but I can wait and I'm sure it will be all the better for such experiences and illustrations as these" (489). Jo herself articulates her developing literateness, realizing that literacy requires an understanding of the writer's responsibility in the world, one that comes through experience. Marriage does not guarantee that Jo's literacy will be subjugated to female domesticity as much as it illustrates what a "wonderful harvest" is provided by a workable compromise between feminine domesticity and masculine individualism, by an acknowledged balance between orality and literacy, and between the private and the social spheres. Moreover, Jo's

marriage does not invalidate the novel's success at complicating stereotypes of literacy and domesticity and, within the narrow framework of the sentimental novel, dovetailing them with masculine notions of individualism to retest the boundaries of nineteenth-century gender roles.

Of course, *Little Women* is Louisa May Alcott's fictionalized and rather sentimental version of developing literateness. Jo's ability to reconcile her domestic identity with her literary identity and the smoothness of the chestnut which emerges from the burr become possible only when economic reality fades into the background at the end of the novel. In Jo March's idealized version of domestic literacy, her public audience and her private audience blend together so seamlessly that she no longer experiences the myriad conflicts of literary publication. She never has to learn to negotiate the conflicting demands of audience.

Economic concerns also figured prominently in the life and career of Alcott herself, though rather than becoming less important as she established her career, Alcott's financial situation seems to have had a greater impact on her identity as a writer. As a single woman who assumed the role of both mother and father to the Alcott family, Louisa could never completely disregard the demands of her audience and her publishers because she needed always to be concerned about what would sell. The movement from writing thrillers to moral tales is echoed by Alcott's maturation from a young girl to a mother. Alcott manages to address the demands of the literary marketplace, her own creative desires, the financial responsibilities of her family *and* the Christian ethic of her culture in a way which is quite different from Jo March's successful integration of multiple discourses. For Alcott, continuing to write meant doing precisely what Jo did so well in her reading: constantly shifting

among all the different discourses and audiences at her disposal--writing moral tales, writing lurid thrillers under a pseudonym, writing stories for children and novels like *Work* which directly address her own conflicts as a woman and keeping a journal in which she has conversations with herself and her family. Alcott did not, like Susan Warner, select only one audience to write for, nor did she ever seamlessly weave together all the conflicting strands of her literacy. Instead, she constantly shifted among the multiple discourses available to her, with a sophisticated maneuverability akin to the metaliteracy which characterized the experience of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs.

This kind of literateness is complex and often difficult to maintain. Towards the end of Alcott's life, it frequently seems that the internal, almost physical need to write becomes indistinguishable from Alcott's external economic motives. In one journal entry she writes that she "fired up the engine and plunged into a vortex, with many doubts about getting out. Can't work slowly; the thing possesses me and I must obey till it's done. One thousand dollars was sent as a seal upon the bargain, so I was bound and sat at the galley like a slave" (223). In another journal entry Alcott describes the external impetus for writing. She claims that "duty chains me to my galley" and "the golden goose can sell her eggs for a good price, if she isn't killed by too much driving" (228). When physically ill, she also describes the solace of writing: "I had some pleasant hours when I forgot my body and lived in my mind" (298). In these entries the dividing lines between the physical and mental, the internal and the external, the public and private aspects of literacy become blurred, in much the same way that the fluidity of reading characterized the life of the little women. This fluidity makes the argument about opposition put forth by Judith Fetterley seem oversimplified.

Fetterley argues that Alcott, "in failing to give Jo a fate other than that

of the little women . . . altered her own values in deference to the opinions of others, and obliterated her own identity as an economically independent women who much preferred to paddle her own canoe than to resign herself to the dependence of a marriage“ (142). The story told in Louisa May Alcott’s own journals dramatizes the reality of the life of literary spinsterhood that critics like Fetterley imply would have been preferable to marriage for Jo. That reality was a complicated experience of independence, at once a kind of public enslavement and a source of personal empowerment. I couldn’t help feeling as I read Alcott’s journals, as she wrote on and wrote on, increasingly restrained and confined by the demands and responsibilities of authorship, that perhaps she [and we] may have underestimated the costs of such “independent” lifestyle. The more successful and independent she became as a writer, the more duty-bound she became and the more intensely she guarded her privacy and isolation. She wrote: “Company often; and strangers begin to come, demanding to see the authoress, who does not like it and becomes porcupiny. Admire the books, but let the dear woman alone, if you please, dear public” (136). Despite her successful public career, Alcott maintained a strong measure of the antagonism with society which conflicted Jo. She repeatedly expressed a need for the protection and isolation of the chrysalis even after she emerged as a successful author. At the end of her life, to guarantee herself some measure of privacy she resorted to “sort[ing] old letters and burn[ing] many. Not wise to keep for curious eyes to read and gossip lovers to print by and by” (297). It appears that even a life of literary independence involved a whole host of compromises.

The personal costs of maintaining an isolated, independent lifestyle and the role that literacy plays in redefining the meaning of independence are further explored in the final chapter of this study, which simultaneously

examines the literacy of Henry James and of Isabel Archer, the fictional heroine of James's *The Portrait of a Lady*. Several critics have established the fact that James read and reviewed much of Alcott's work and that his fictional plots can be read as revisions of Alcott's. In *Portrait*, James tells a story which speaks to Alcott's inquiry into the nature of female literacy. Isabel Archer's habit of confusing romance with reality, combined with her financial inheritance and her inability to write make for a tragic combination leading to domestic failure. The price of this failure is a painful life of imprisonment in Henry James's house of fiction.

## NOTES FOR CHAPTER IV

1. Ann Douglas's description of Alcott's heroines echo the language of the chrysalis: "the little girls of Alcott's later works have something in common with the femmes fatales of her early books: they too undergo metamorphosis, not growth" (240). Douglas claims that Jo remains stuck in the middle of the extremes between rebellious heroines and submissive little women, though I would argue that Jo undergoes a tremendous period of growth in *Little Women*, specifically in her developing literacy.

2. Douglas reads this community as imprisoning, claiming that Alcott's characters "can never free themselves from what feels like a claustrophobically communal atmosphere" (239). This description of the March family community seems out of sync with the intense enjoyment and gaiety experienced in these scenes. Being cut off from the family community and being "all alone" is clearly the more difficult experience for the girls. Furthermore, the opposite experience, the isolation of Ellen Montgomery, is clearly much more oppressive.

3. Jo March fails as a writer when she initially tries to become one with her audience. It is only when she takes the opposite path and disregards her audience to write in a voice informed by her inner private family life that she, like Emerson, succeeds as a writer.

4. The girls' ability to quote texts directly indicates that they can see continuities between the texts they read and their own lives. However in quoting an African-American character from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and transposing racial differences, Jo is also *misquoting* the words and the meaning of the scene in which Tom is being sold away from his family. In Chapter X of Stowe's novel, it is Tom, not Aunt Chloe who says "Let's think on our marcies!" and he says so "tremulously, as if he was quite sure he needed to think on them very hard indeed" (92). Aunt Chloe disagrees strongly with Tom. "Marcies!" said Aunt Chloe; 'don't see no marcy in't! 'tan't right! 'tan't right it should be so!" (92). John Ernest notes that in quoting these lines, Jo is in effect giving a blackface performance, which he explains as "a matter of quoting stereotypical black characters of fiction by white authors, usually in a gesture toward some rough, primitive, and humorous bit of simple wisdom, [which] happens quite often in American culture." In terms of Jo's literacy, if the lines do come from an Uncle Tom show or some other cultural artifact from the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* industry, Jo's misquotation indicates that she has an extra-textual literacy. If she is simply misquoting the text, then it may indicate that she is in the habit of selectively revising the authoritative discourse of fictional texts by infusing them with her own internally persuasive discourse in order to help her understand her own life situation. Her ability to do this kind of selective revision does, however, amount to merging the character of Aunt Chloe with Uncle Tom and a consequent misreading of the character of Aunt Chloe. This kind of misreading is quite different from the Isabel Archer's

misreading as discussed in Chapter V. Jo is misreading a fictional text, but Isabel is misreading her own reality. My thanks to John Ernest for pointing this misquotation out to me. For a similar discussion of “moral blackface” in Fanny Fern’s journalism, see Lauren Berlant’s “The Female Woman: Fanny Fern and the Form of Sentiment.”

5. In using the term self-reliance, I am loosely referring to Ralph Waldo Emerson’s conception of self-reliance as presented in his essay of the same name. I am also revising Emerson’s term, using it to refer to the American concept of individualism which is generally thought of as a masculine term. As a close friend of Emerson, Louisa May Alcott was certainly aware of his ideas about self-reliance. In fact, she quotes from Emerson’s essay in her own journals.

6. The relative suitability of Laurie or Professor Bhaer as husbands for Jo has been the focus of many critical conversations. From the perspective of their literacies, Bhaer is easily the better match. Laurie doesn’t read much at all, even though he has a library full of books, because his “head is weak” and he rejects Jo’s offer to read to him. The only writing he does do is to write a fictional love letter to Meg which Jo believes “had hastened the evil day [of Meg’s engagement] for her” (217). Laurie also proposes that he and Jo run off to Washington and “leave a letter saying we are all right” (213). While Bhaer helps Jo develop as a writer, Laurie’s his literate acts draw Jo further into disobedience and childishness.



## CHAPTER V

### THE MASTER LEARNS TO READ: *THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY* AS LITERACY NARRATIVE

[In the] United States . . . the storyteller's art is almost exclusively feminine, [and] is mainly in the hands of timid (even when very accomplished) women, whose acquaintance with life is severely restricted. . . . The novel, moreover, . . . is almost always addressed to young unmarried ladies, or at least always assumes them to be a large part of the novelist's public. . . . Half of life is a sealed book to young unmarried ladies, and how can a novel be worth anything that only deals with half a life? How can a portrait be painted with half a face?

-Henry James, "Nana" 1880.

In every novel the work is divided between the writer and the reader; but the writer makes the reader very much as he makes his characters.

-Henry James, "The Novels of George Eliot," 1866

It almost goes without saying that reading Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* (1882) in relation to the literacy narratives previously explored in this study is rather unconventional. After all, Henry James has consistently enjoyed a highly privileged position in the canon of American letters. James's novels have always been considered "classics." Indeed, an entire industry of criticism has been devoted to exploring James's "genius" as a novelist. This dissertation, however, has dealt primarily with the texts of literary outsiders, individuals marginalized from mainstream culture because of race, gender or class. Moreover, the literary reputations of writers like Fern, Warner and Douglass have been in constant flux since the nineteenth century, only regaining prominence in the last thirty years or so, thanks to the important work of feminist and African-American scholars. In situating James on the margins of this study, I have begun to deconstruct such hierarchies of literary value and to question the boundaries which have traditionally separated

writers like James from those such as Fern and Alcott. Reading James's own literate acts in relation to, for example, the constantly shifting literacies of Frederick Douglass, or the ethical dimension of literacy illustrated by Harriet Jacobs, allows us to reconsider Henry James from outside the circle of culture he inhabits. This means exploring his fictional texts for their insights into literacy, as opposed to seeing value in them only as 'literature.' After all, if this study has revealed anything thus far, it is that the process of literacy requires such crossing of cultural, racial, gender and class borders; it has shown the necessity of moving back and forth between the individual consciousness of the writer and the various cultural conditions under which she creates her text.

In fact, as the example of Frederick Douglass has so clearly shown, it is only in moving beyond ideologically sanctioned theories about literacy, in shifting into the 'spaces left,' that we develop as literate beings. In this chapter, I will argue that it is precisely because Henry James enjoyed such a privileged position in American culture, and because he *theorized* so extensively about reading and writing, that he initially failed to fully understand the complex realities of literacy. As the avatar of literary high culture, James was in a position very similar to that of the slavemasters who attempted to control Frederick Douglass's literacy: he was unconscious of the meaning of literacy in the world outside his circle of literary privilege, outside the fictional worlds he created. James's own position thus mirrors the experience of his fictional heroine in *The Portrait of a Lady*. Isabel Archer, too, lives too much in the world of her own imagination, in a world of "factitious theories." As I will argue, her personal tragedy is attributable to her failure as a reader. Isolated by her inheritance and her habit of reading romances, Isabel confuses fiction with reality and thus fails to clearly read the world around her. The same holds true for James. He acts as the "watcher in the window" required by his own theory

of fictional realism, but his acts of cultural observation about female literacy are divorced from experience. As a result, they turn out to be misreadings, inconsistent with the literate experiences chronicled by women writers themselves. Neither Henry James nor Isabel Archer possess the kind of second sight which has been shown integral to the metaliteracies of Douglass, Fern, Jacobs and Alcott.

*The Portrait of a Lady* is thus both autobiography and fiction.<sup>1</sup> It is Henry James's own literacy narrative--the portrait of his own emerging consciousness as a writer and a gradual coming to terms with his own failures as a reader. It is also the literacy narrative of Isabel Archer--the fictional story of her education in reading and writing. As James described it, the novel is about "the history of the growth of one's imagination" (qtd. in Miller 47). If we look at the novel in this way, as both window and mirror for James, then his words from the epigraph to this chapter take on special resonance. James says that "[i]n every novel the work is divided between the writer and the reader; but the writer makes the reader very much as he makes his characters." In James's understanding of fictional realism, each act of writing begins with an act of reading--close observation of the world. In James's process of writing *The Portrait*, he is also making himself as a reader as he simultaneously creates the character of Isabel Archer who is also a reader. However, in writing the novel, James changes his own identity as a reader. And the same will hold true for Isabel Archer. When (or if) she takes up the pen at the end of the novel to decide her own fate, her understanding of what it means to read will be changed forever. Throughout the course of the novel, James's relationship to Isabel changes as well. He becomes more sympathetic to his alter-ego's plight, reflecting his own development as a reader.

At the same time, as I will discuss in the final section of this chapter,

the novel is a lesson in literacy for James's audience on two levels. From the beginning, James attempts to teach us how to read well, that is, how to avoid the kind of reading which gets Isabel into so much trouble. By the end of the novel, James backs off from his efforts to fully control our reading habits. He does this by neglecting to provide an ending to the novel, thus forcing us as readers to share in the work of writing. James was aware of this incomplete ending, claiming in his *Notebooks* that "the obvious criticism of course would be that it is not finished--that I have not seen the heroine to the end of her situation--that I have left her *en l'air*" (qtd. in Walton 49). As readers, we must therefore complete our reading by writing our own ending to *The Portrait of a Lady*, and in doing so engage in the kind of reading which involves active engagement with the word and the world.

*The Portrait of a Lady* ostensibly takes as its fictional subject the education of Isabel Archer, an independent female character labeled by Geoffrey Moore as "the New Woman of the 1870's" (16). As autobiography, the novel's subject is Henry James's anxious and rather antagonistic reading of this New Woman figure. This reading, a hidden sub-text, reveals James's developing identity as a writer amid the cultural conditions which created enormously popular female writers like Alcott and Warner. As Isabel's personal tragedy comes into relief, the novel reveals James's assumptions about the dangers of female literacy. His failure to understand the limitations and subtleties of the process of literacy for marginalized individuals provokes his warning about the tragic personal and cultural implications of a woman who reads poorly; a woman who can't seem to understand the difference between the texts she reads and the life she lives. As Alfred Habegger argues, *The Portrait of a Lady* "is about the treacherous female imagination that had

created a vast Anglo-American tradition of fiction" (54).

As the quote about women which opens this chapter illustrates, Henry James had little faith in the abilities of women as writers or readers.<sup>2</sup> He believed that women writers were not adequately acquainted with life. Priscilla Walton explains:

the idea that women are inferior underpins James's writings. For example, in a review of Nassau W. Senior's *Essays on Fiction* published in the *North American Review* in 1864, James speaks of how art is only appreciated by mature readers. He laments the incredulity of 'young persons' (very quickly identified as 'young women') and notes that only when they mellow with age will they become more accepting of fiction. He writes that, as a woman grows older, 'she will be plunged in household cares; her life will have grown prosaic; her thoughts will have overcome their bad habits. It would seem, therefore, that as her knowledge of life has increased, her judgment of fiction, which is but a reflection of life, should have become more unerring.' (290)

James also implies that female readers, mostly "young unmarried ladies" like Isabel Archer, are incapable of reading clearly since for most of them "half of life is a sealed book." When James asks "How can a novel be worth anything that only deals with half a life? How can a portrait be painted with half a face?" he seems to be speaking simultaneously about women readers and writers of the nineteenth century and about his own "portrait" of Isabel.

Not surprisingly, many critics have commented on the fact that Isabel's portrait is lacking. As Joel Porte explains, while the novel was widely praised by critics when it was first published in 1881, "a persistent negative report also began to be heard" (4) about the fact that no portrait is really given of Isabel. Porte quotes R.H. Hutton who remarked in the *Spectator* that "[s]he is one lady of whom no portrait is given . . . the central figure remains shrouded in mist" (qtd. in Porte 4). Margaret Oliphant wrote, in *Blackwood's*: "Of the

heroine, upon whom the greatest pains have been expended, and to whom endless space is afforded for the setting forth of her characteristics, we have no portrait" (qtd. in Porte 4). This incomplete portrait was created by James to reflect those 'inexperienced' female heroines created by 'inexperienced' feminine storytellers of the nineteenth century. If Isabel Archer was to be a James's interpretation of the literate woman he felt such antagonism for, then she must remain an unreadable text. To paint her fully would require a more thorough reading of reality than Henry James was able to give.

Alfred Habegger's study of Henry James and the women writers of the nineteenth century has established the fact that James read and reviewed nearly all of the novels written by women in the 1850's and 1860's including Alcott's novels and *The Wide, Wide World*. Habegger explains that James severely criticized the work of many women writers. At the same time, James's own novels frequently appropriate (and distort) the very same plot structure found in the work of his female predecessors, thus making James's fiction "an extension of his criticism" (82). James's early fiction was involved in a "misguided enterprise of purifying women's fiction," (56) which involved a reworking of the familiar plot found in many feminine novels of the 1860's, that of the romance between the child-woman and the older man.

Habegger explains that "the decisive turn of mind that eventuated in *The Portrait* was a "final impatience with [James's female predecessors]. If all the precociously independent heroines would insist on falling for a middle-aged monster, all right then, his own heroine would do so with a vengeance. And if it was not possible to renovate the masterly old lover, then he should be made as quiet and sinister and poisonous as possible" (156). And what of his heroine's proclaimed love of liberty? "Let her sense of freedom weigh on her so heavily that she begins to dream of confinement, of daughterly surrender" (156). By

creating a female character with a reputation as a literate New Woman, and then making her a victim of her own poor reading habits, James manages to appropriate and critique female literacy while seeming to advance it within his fiction.<sup>3</sup>

Habegger argues that there is “an unbroken line between [these female novelists] and [James’s] own corrective judgment” (24) which emerges out of James’s own personal relationships.<sup>4</sup> I see the unbroken line as also emerging out of James’s identity as a writer, and out of his own intense efforts to theorize about reading and writing, as well as his insecurities at the beginning of his career. Before he began writing novels, while reading and reviewing women’s fiction, he had already begun his search “for a viable theory of fiction.” As Leon Edel explains, “the young Henry James had more theory in his head and a wider embrace of European models than any novelist writing in the United States--and he had not yet written a novel yet” (70). Edel’s description of the young James sounds a lot like Isabel Archer, who is described as “a young person of many theories” (103).

Once he began publishing, James felt a “growing sense of alienation from his audience” (Jolly 82). Roslyn Jolly describes the relationship between James and the reading public as “seriously awry, defined by loss and sacrifice, driven by interests fundamentally opposed” (83). James’s own comments about young unmarried women readers reinforce Jolly’s assessment. As Jolly explains, there was a lack of demand for James’s novels in the early part of his career when *The Portrait of a Lady* was written.<sup>5</sup> Before the novel’s publication James told William Dean Howells, “I must try and seek a larger success than I have yet done. I am in great need of it--a larger success” (qtd. in Edel 251). Jolly further argues that because of James’s anxious relationship

with his audience, much of his fiction deals with a “scapegoating of the reading public (especially as represented by women) and a complete dissociation . . . of creative artists from destructive readers” (85).<sup>6</sup>

Jolly’s assessment provides a possible explanation as to why James makes Isabel one of those destructive readers. According to Jolly, “the characterization . . . of Isabel Archer . . . [is] very much the product of the discourse on women’s and working class reading into which Victorian culture channeled much of its anxiety about fiction, and [she is] tragically foreclosed by the distrust of the [female] imagination expressed in these discourses” (43). For example, James casts Isabel as an independent young woman “of many theories [whose] imagination was remarkably active” (103), but he simultaneously mocks her literary endeavors. He describes her as having “no talent for expression and too little of the consciousness of genius” (103). Represented as a victim of her own imagination, Isabel is not allowed to develop critically from reading romances to the truly active process of writing. Instead, James paralyzes Isabel, making her incapable of moving beyond her theories toward the kind of experience which he deems necessary for a mature reader.

As author, Henry James seems torn between the choices represented by Ralph Touchett and Gilbert Osmond. As Ralph, James provides Isabel with the financial inheritance, the sympathy and good will which allows her to plot her own course of action. He does not try to control the outcome but simply sets events in motion and sits back to observe. As Gilbert Osmond, James seems primarily interested in controlling and in punishing Isabel for her efforts to use her imagination. In creating such a character as Isabel, James’s novel is involved in extending his criticism of women’s texts, for as James Machor explains, male reviewers of the nineteenth century were mostly interested in



controlling female readers by reinforcing patriarchal hegemony. Roslyn Jolly concurs, arguing that moral of the story for Isabel is “that living and storytelling involve very different arts and that it is dangerous to try to cross the boundary between them, to try to live by fictions” (96).

As author, James operates like Master Flint, who tries to restrict Linda Brent with externally defined plot lines. He is also like John Humphreys, who controls every aspect of Ellen Montgomery’s literacy. Motherless Isabel seems like a revised version of Susan Warner’s orphan Ellen Montgomery. Moreover, *The Wide, Wide World* deals primarily with characters who try (with varying degrees of effectiveness) to mother or parent Ellen, efforts which are all intimately connected to control of her reading habits. Likewise, James’s novel is populated with women writers, including Mrs. Touchett and Henrietta Stackpole, all ineffective substitute mothers, who each attempt direct Isabel’s destiny by writing their own plot for her. As in the literacy narratives of Jacobs, Alcott, Warner and Fern, mothering and writing are intimately connected to each other. Each female character’s capacity as a mother serves as a metaphor for her abilities as a writer. Ultimately, Isabel Archer’s development as a writer hinges upon her decision about how best to mother Pansy Osmond.<sup>7</sup>

There are many differences between Isabel’s literate abilities and those of the other female writer-characters examined in previous chapters of this study, which underscore James’s misreading of the literate woman. For example, Linda Brent is *metaliterate*. She learns to shift her literate activities to elude her master’s efforts at oppression; the manner in which she chooses to read and write (or not to do so) changes according to the circumstances. In much the same way, Josephine March reads differently depending upon which kind of text she comes into contact with. These women are able to read

critically and, to “understand the difference between a sermon and a spin.” James, however, does not allow Isabel such critical abilities. Instead, she reads all texts--even the events of her life-- in the same way, as romances.

James’s stunting of Isabel’s literate abilities reflect his effort to realistically render what he considered to be the dangers of female literacy. But James’s understanding of Isabel’s limitations emerge out of his own patriarchal assumptions, his own flawed theories and his own insecurities.<sup>8</sup>

In Henry James’s understanding of the relationship between the word and the world, there should be a perfect continuum between literature and life. Fiction should be based on close observation of an individual’s experiences, with little or no rearrangement. Two of the most important elements in James’s theory of fiction are the freedom of the individual author and the truth of the subject being observed. James claims that “the breath of the novelist’s being is his liberty” (qtd. in Miller 6). He also believes that “subjects live their own lives, and for the author to impose his abstractions--ideas, morals, philosophy--on them is to violate their freedom” (7). He goes on further to claims that writers should be free from rules and regulations and free for experimentation (26).

Admittedly, Henry James is theorizing about fiction and novel-writing and it is clear that he is primarily interested in the aesthetic aspect of literacy. (He is also interested in criticizing the romance, which in his estimation has little value because it distorts reality.) Yet his theory of fictional realism extends far beyond the boundaries of fiction, for Henry James claims that “if the artist does his job well, then there will be little difference between fiction and history” (30). “To represent and illustrate the past, the actions of men, is the task of either the novelist or the historian” (31). Making such a statement

has the effect of erasing the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, which makes James's theory applicable not only to novelists, but to all writers, including those marginalized individuals like Frederick Douglass whose written narratives also have status as history.

In the Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, Henry James discusses his theory of fiction through the metaphor of a house. He writes that

the house of fiction has not one window, but a million . . . every one of which has been pierced, or is still piercable, in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will. These apertures, of dissimilar shape and size . . . are but windows at the best, mere holes in a dead wall, disconnected, perched aloft; they are not hinged doors opening straight upon life. . . at each of them stands a figure with a pair of eyes, or at least with a field glass, which forms again and again, for observation, a unique instrument insuring to the person making use of it an impression distinct from every other. He and his neighbors are watching the same show, but one seeing more where the other sees less, one seeing black where the other sees white, one seeing coarse where the other sees fine. . . . The spreading field, the human scene, is the 'choice of subject'; the pierced aperture, either broad or balconied or slit-like and low-browed, is the 'literary form'; but they are, singly or together, as nothing without the posted presence of the watcher--without, in other words, the consciousness of the artist. Tell me what the artist is, and I will tell you of that he has *been* conscious. Thereby I shall express to you at once his boundless freedom and his 'moral' reference. (46)

Though James is discussing the genre of fiction, his description of the process of being literate, the image of the individual looking through pierced apertures, "mere holes in a dead wall," brings to mind Harriet Jacobs' act of authorship as she remained enclosed in her grandmother's garret, looking through the peephole she had carved for herself. Certainly Jacobs fits James's description of the writer, her consciousness as an artist emerging from the scene of slavery spread out before her; her particular power as a writer dependent upon her being hidden from view. Fanny Fern's frame of moral reference fits

James's image as well, as evident from the scene in *Ruth Hall* in which Ruth sits at the small window of her tenement apartment and views the panorama of poverty window by window. "Tier above tier the windows rose, full of pale, anxious, care worn faces" (90).

The important difference in these architectural metaphors is that for writers like Jacobs and Fern, authorship involves much more than "making . . . an impression distinct from every other." It may also be true that for a marginalized writer, "[s]he and [her] neighbors are watching the same show, but one seeing more where the other sees less, one seeing black where the other sees white, one seeing coarse where the other sees fine," but while maintaining the uniqueness of the individual vision is most important for James, for marginalized writers it is more important to see *both* black and white, to see both more *and* less, to see both coarse *and* fine. Seeing only one vision can be dangerous. Gaining the second sight necessary to see while also anticipating the vision of the other, an indication of metaliteracy, is simply a matter of survival. That doubleness seems to account for the difference between James' house metaphor and the chrysalis. In James's vision, writing requires that one remain the watcher in the window. In the understanding of literacy presented thus far in this dissertation, one must be able to exist within the chrysalis, but it is also vitally important to emerge from the chrysalis, to look into the windows of the house from outside its confines.

The fact that Isabel *refuses* to look out of the windows of her grandmother's library, but prefers instead to lock herself inside and read romances, separates her immediately from Ruth Hall and Harriet Jacobs and thus offers a hint that she will be unable to participate in the act of critical literacy because, like Ellen Montgomery, she has little sense of the world beyond. The kind of fluidity between literacy and domesticity that was typical

of Jo March's experience becomes stagnant in the example of Isabel.<sup>9</sup> Also, the fact that Ralph Touchett and Gilbert Osmond are frequently portrayed looking in and out of the windows of their respective dwellings, Gardencourt and the Palazzo Rocanero, reinforces the hint that these two male characters, who represent opposing versions of James's fictive imagination, will interfere with Isabel's literate efforts.<sup>10</sup>

Understanding Henry James's theory of fiction in relation to writers like Douglass or Fanny Fern, or Isabel Archer for that matter, we begin to see its basis in privilege; its inability to account for the experience of individuals who do *not* have access to complete freedom. Henry James's theory of narrative never questions its own assumptions, never examines the authority upon which his house of fiction is built. But the understanding of literacy suggested by the work of the marginalized writers previously examined in this study *requires* such questioning of its own ideologies as well as the patriarchal authority which works to devalue it. In making Isabel Archer the victim of her inexperience as a reader, James imposes his own privileged ideology of literacy on her, breaking his own fictive rule that "subjects live their own lives, and for the author to impose his abstractions--ideas, morals, philosophy--on them is to violate their freedom" (7). Henry James makes a practice of violating Isabel Archer's freedom by caricaturing her intellectual habits and constructing her reading as a dangerous activity. More likely, as the experience of other women readers and writers have shown, reading is an empowering, dialogic activity.

It is this disjunction between Henry James's theoretical approach to literacy--based on his cultural constructions of gender and blinded by the narrow vision of class and privilege--and the actual experiences of those (mostly female) writers he accuses of shortsightedness, vulgarity and

superficiality, which plays itself out in *The Portrait of a Lady* and which repeatedly propels him to misrepresent Isabel Archer's capacity as a reader. To apply a characterization of Isabel Archer to James himself, "[Henry James] was probably very liable to the sin of self-esteem; [he] often surveyed with complacency the field of [his] own nature; [he] was in the habit of taking for granted, on scanty evidence, that [he] was right" (104). When Henry James claims that "there will be no value [in the novel] unless there is freedom to feel and say" (33), he fails to see that many writers were denied access to the kind of education and freedom which James theorized as the necessary root of the writer's craft. Moreover, gaining literacy in a culture which denies an individual access to freedom can make one's literate skills even keener and provide a means to critique cultural ideologies. Instead of being sensitive to that reality, Henry James makes Isabel Archer a victim of her own literacy.

Henry James's *The Portrait of A Lady* is an act of writing centrally about the act of reading. The novel is overflowing with scenes of reading, both literal and metaphorical. Characters read novels, letters, scenery and paintings; they read and misread each other. James describes nearly every character in the novel with a metaphor of textuality. His heroine, Isabel Archer, finds her model for action in the romantic literature she reads as a child. The novel's romantic conflicts, such as Isabel's repeated refusal of various suitors, hinge on the interchange of letters, many of which fail to reach their intended destination. Moreover, Isabel's primary role throughout the novel is to read each of the potential marriage scripts plotted for her by other characters. As Judith Fetterley has said in a discussion about American classics in general, "for James, reading is the dominant metaphor for life, and

his art is designed to teach us to read well" (147). Tragically, Isabel Archer learns too late to "read well."

At the same time, each character is involved in a literate enterprise which replicates Henry James's task as author--writing the story of Isabel Archer. The question each character takes up in the novel mirrors James's explanation of his own task in the preface to the novel. He explains that "it was as if they had simply, by an impulse of their own, floated into my ken, and all in response to my primary question: "Well, what will she *do*?" (51). Isabel is surrounded by eager authors, intent upon casting her as their heroine of their own stories. For James, answering the question of what Isabel would do, meant focusing "on the consciousness of [the] heroine's satellites, especially the male" (50). The male satellites of the novel, Ralph Touchett, Gilbert Osmond, Lord Warburton and Caspar Goodwood, are each involved in writing a possible marriage plot for Isabel while the female characters also attempt, unsuccessfully, to do the same. Each female character has a unique literate identity which is indirectly related to her capacity as a mother and her efforts to mother Isabel. Yet each female writer fails because the power of the male writers repeatedly supersedes them.

Take for example, Mrs. Touchett, whose ineffectual efforts at mothering and writing mirror each other. As a writer, Mrs. Touchett is known for her cryptic telegrams, which Ralph claims are "rather inscrutable. They say women don't know how to write them, but mother has thoroughly mastered the art of condensation . . . my father and I have scarcely stopped puzzling over them; they seem to admit of so many interpretations" (67). Mrs. Touchett herself claims, "I never know what I mean in my telegrams -- especially those I send from America. Clearness is too expensive" (98). Mrs. Touchett "seemed simply to feel the need of thinking things over and summing them up; she had a

little moral account-book--with columns unerringly ruled and a sharp steel clasp--which she kept with unerring neatness" (255). Likewise, her efforts at mothering are formal, condensed and and rather distant. Ralph explains that his mother, who "embraced her boy with gloved hands" (91) "thinks me of no more use than a postage stamp without gum" (68). His father "was the more motherly; his mother, on the other hand, was paternal, and even . . . gubernatorial" (91).

Mrs. Touchett's hopes for Isabel are like her cryptic telegrams--unclear to anyone else, unreadable except to the writer. Mrs. Touchett explains that she rescues Isabel from Albany because "she was meant for something better" but when Ralph asks his mother what she intends to do with Isabel, Mrs. Touchett replies that her only duty is to provide Isabel with choices. "Do with her?" she replies to Ralph's question, "You talk as if she were a yard of calico. I shall do absolutely nothing with her, and she herself will do absolutely everything she chooses" (98). Ralph reads his mother's decision to bring Isabel to Europe as an adoption, an act of mothering, but in reality, Mrs. Touchett's actions with regard to Isabel, like her acts of writing, are rather selfish. She explains of her decision to bring Isabel to Europe: "I thought she would to me credit. I like to be thought well of, and for a woman of my age there's no greater convenience" (96). She believes that having Isabel around will be a positive reflection upon her.

Mrs. Touchett's efforts to provide a plot for Isabel are thus secondary to her own independent storyline. Yet Mrs. Touchett loses control over her own storyline once Ralph decides to give Isabel her inheritance, for Isabel no longer needs to rely on her aunt financially. Mrs. Touchett's introduction of Isabel to Madame Merle, however, does play a pivotal role in deciding Isabel's future. But Mrs. Touchett failed to imagine the outcome of this relationship. Neither



did she read it clearly as it was developing. Mrs. Touchett is thus as self-centered a writer and as short-sighted a reader as she is a mother.

Henrietta Stackpole is a published author, a journalist with a critical eye, a “reporter in petticoats” who takes for the structure of her narrative her own personal experiences as a traveler. She writes about and publishes her interactions with her European “specimens” (106). Henrietta can’t seem to imagine anything other than a commonsensical plot for Isabel, a marriage to Goodwood, a marriage of Americans. As I will argue, Isabel is a reader caught up in a romance, but the “quick fingered” (136) Henrietta is a factual writer, “thoroughly launched in journalism” (106). While Isabel struggles with the vague outlines and incoherent thoughts of her undefined story, Henrietta’s writings are clear as day. She’s as “crisp and comprehensive as a first issue before the folding. From tip to toe, she’s probably had no misprint” (138). While Isabel fears publication, Henrietta’s letters from abroad “are universally quoted” (105). And in comparison to Isabel’s sense of confusion in textual or economic production (for she does not write, not does she earn her independence through honest labor) as well as maternal re-production, (for she loses her only child), Henrietta is a model of reproductive capacity. “Without parents and without property, [she] adopted three of the children of an infirm and widowed sister and was paying for their school-bills out of the proceeds of her literary labor” (106). Henrietta’s capacity for literary production and economic liberty guarantees her the freedom of plot and choice that Isabel seems fearful of losing. “Henrietta was a literary woman and the great advantage of being a literary woman was that you could go anywhere and do anything” (179), a lesson clearly illustrated by Ruth Hall. Isabel sticks with reading because she is *not* a literary woman comfortable with writing her own story.

Despite the success of Henrietta's "reproductive instincts" and her "literary labors" she is ultimately ineffective as the authoress of Isabel's story, primarily because her brand of writing, like her mothering, is largely a commercial undertaking. Neither a fictional realist, nor a "real" mother, Henrietta bears the brunt of James's antagonism for women writers. Like Ruth Hall, Henrietta is highly disdained by nearly every character in the novel for her independence as a writer. For example, Ralph asks Isabel of Henrietta, "She must be a kind of monster. Is she very ugly?" (137).

Henrietta Stackpole, more than any other character in the novel, seems to read Isabel's character most clearly. But Henrietta exerts no influence over Isabel Archer, because Henry James enervates the novel's most intellectual female character by making a caricature out of her. In his Preface, anticipating the image of Isabel rattling along in her runaway carriage, James describes Henrietta as

but wheels to the coach; [she] belongs to the body of that vehicle, or is for a moment accommodated with a seat inside. There the subject alone is ensconced, in the form of its 'hero and heroine' and of the privileged high officials, say, who ride with the king and queen. . . . Miss Stackpole [is a case of] the light *ficelle*, not of the true agent; [she] may run beside the coach 'for all [she is] worth', [she] may cling to it till [she is] out of breath (as poor Miss Stackpole all so visibly does), but neither, all the while, so much as gets her foot on the step, neither ceases for a moment to tread the dusty road. (53)

These remarks take on special resonance when we remember that "poor Miss Stackpole" is a successful female writer, like the many women writers Alfred Habegger has reminded us Henry James severely criticized. Such a description of Henrietta indicates that James went to great lengths to create a female writer as a character, and then proceeded to take away her ability to attain true agency, another ironic comment on female authorship in general.

In fact, Leon Edel explains that Henry James told William Dean Howells in 1877 that Henrietta “was the result of an impression made upon me by a variety of encounters and acquaintances during the past few years.” Once such woman was described in a letter written by Henry to his brother William as “accursed. . . . She is, I suppose, a very honourable specimen of her type; but the type--the literary spinster, sailing-into-your-intimacy-American-hotel-piazza-type--doesn't bear somehow the mellow light of the old world” ( qtd. in Edel 261).

Serena Merle, however, bears the mellow light of the old world quite well. She comes the novel's most successful authoress, the one who finely crafts Isabel's marriage according to her own self-serving script. In marrying Isabel to her former lover, and putting Isabel in the role of surrogate mother to her own daughter, Madame Merle's literate acts and her acts of mothering merge. Isabel sees her as a mother figure, but Isabel fails to see the manipulative potential in Merle's motherly actions. Moreover, in writing Isabel's marriage plot, Merle is doing more than mothering Isabel; she is more interested in making Isabel into a mother by revising the story of her own life, re-writing it with Isabel as the heroine. She says to Isabel: “If only I could begin again--if I could have my life before me” (251). And she does. Madame Merle realizes that Osmond never married her because she had no money and he wanted bigger things. But she also knows that she can cast Isabel in a revised version of her life, because Isabel is wealthy enough for Osmond to marry. Isabel can then assume the role of mother that Madame Merle has been forced to deny. Madame Merle is the most successful female literate in the novel, but her version of female authorship relies on secrecy and manipulation--qualities which also characterize her mothering. Moreover, once she sets her plot for Isabel and Pansy into action, she loses complete control over its outcome. She

admits to Osmond, "I'm frightened at the abyss into which I've cast her" (335), referring to Isabel, but also admitting that she has lost control over her daughter as well.

There is one female character who comes closest to erasing Madame Merle's script and providing Isabel with the ability to write her own story. Countess Gemini, "the daughter of a defunct poetess" (498), about whom many stories have been circulated, provides Isabel with the correct reading of Madame Merle's text. She does so, she says, because she likes for secrets to be published (500). Like a reader, she was "bored by the story" with Isabel not knowing. Osmond says of his sister:

She's a very honest lady--more so than she seems. She's rather unhappy, and as she's not of a serious turn she doesn't show it tragically: she shows it comically instead. She's got a horrid husband, though I'm not sure she makes the best of him. Of course, however, a horrid husband's an awkward thing. Madame Merle gives her excellent advice, but it's a good deal like giving a child a dictionary to learn language with. He can look out the words, but he can't put them together. My sister needs a grammar, but unfortunately she's not grammatical. (311)

What Osmond's reading of his sister fails to understand is that even without grammar, his sister's literacy is of the most potent kind because the Countess, upon whose surface "a number of unmistakable blots were to be seen," (328) is the one competent reader of Madame Merle and Osmond's texts. "Having been written on by a variety of hands" she has lived a similar experience. The Countess explains that Isabel has "appeared to succeed in not knowing." She describes her relation to her sister-in-law as "a sort of assistance--aid to innocent ignorance--that I've always been a bad hand at rendering" (589). The Countess Gemini is also a failed mother. "She had lost three within a year of their birth" (330). She does not write, but she is the representation of James's older woman who possesses the "knowledge of life" necessary to make her an

unerring reader. The information she provides “will override the plots of Isabel and her friends and enemies” (Jolly 56), providing Isabel with a model of resisting reading.

With these female characters, Henry James creates repeated parallels between their ineffectuality as mothers and writers. Mrs. Touchett writes unreadable telegrams and is a distant and selfish mother; Henrietta Stackpole’s journalism, like her mothering, is purely economic in nature and therefore unreal. Madame Merle’s secretive and manipulative efforts to script Isabel’s marriage are like her hidden acts of mothering to Pansy. Only childless Countess Gemini manages to protect Isabel Archer by helping her to read more clearly and in effect allow Isabel to write her own story. Yet she does so without ever trying to write herself.

There are several ways to read this pattern in the novel. For example, Beth Sharon Ash, in a psychoanalytic reading of the novel, sees the novel as dealing primarily with the effects of maternal deprivation. “In several ways, *The Portrait* is a portrait of female psychology under patriarchy--or, more specifically, of the narcissistic and submissive tendencies typical of women trying to cope with a culture largely defined by the dominance of male desire” (124). Ash reads all of Isabel’s problems in the novel, her troubled independence and her narcissism, as being attributable to maternal absence. If Ash’s reading is extended by the pattern I have established between mothering and literacy, then Isabel’s tragedy in the novel can also be also understood as an absence of literate/maternal ability. As Ash reminds us, “Isabel’s only child is taken away within the space of a sentence. A fact much overlooked is that the baby Isabel has with Osmond is mentioned only once, and then only after its death” (129). Ash also claims that in this novel true maternity is never represented. “Positive mothers or mother surrogates are clearly absent, and

illegitimate mothers who fail to repair their daughter's initial loss are very much present" (131). Likewise, truly literate women are never represented, though ineffectual women readers and writers abound.<sup>11</sup> If we continue to build on this parallel that James has created, then the question of Isabel's capacity as a writer can be said to depend upon the kind of mother that she becomes to Pansy. First, however, I would like to explore her identity as a reader.

Earlier chapters in this study have explored the experience of the female reader. Several different kinds of readers have been discussed, from Ellen Montgomery's submissive reading of the Bible, to Linda Brent's act of resisting by refusing to read texts written by her master to the sophisticated critical reading of Josephine March. James's American heiress differs from previous reader-characters this study has looked at because she occupies a relatively privileged position in nineteenth-century polite society. As James explains, Isabel "had everything a girl could have: kindness, admiration, bonbons, bouquets, the sense of exclusion from none of the privileges of the world she lived in" (89).

Isabel Archer has unlimited access to books and all the time she wants to enjoy them. She is uncensored in her reading; she loves fiction and romance, and she continually uses her reading of fiction as a model for life. Unfortunately, as we have seen in previous chapters, this model of reading, which creates a continuum between text and reality, was believed to be dangerous for young women, who might be corrupted by confusing themselves with romantic heroines. John Humphreys guards against potential corruption in *The Wide, Wide World* by censoring Ellen Montgomery's reading activities, while Louisa May Alcott creates in Jo March, a female character whose skill as a reader proves such assumptions about female readers to be unfounded.

Unlike Jo March's sophisticated reading strategies, Isabel encounters difficulties in attempting to become a creative reader because (unlike Jo, who rejects romances as potential life plots) Isabel *does* live too much in the world of the romantic novels she reads. Consequently, even though Isabel wants to be independent, she seems unable to imagine a truly original course of action for herself. Isabel struggles to find an original alternative to the marriage script when she rejects the plots proposed for her by Goodwood, Warburton, Henrietta, and Ralph Touchett. But in a misguided effort to write her own script (Osmond), Isabel becomes the victim of her tragic act of *misreading*, involving her relationship with Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond. At the end of the novel, thanks to Countess Gemini, Isabel re-reads her experiences and begins to imagine potential acts of rewriting, involving her own future. Perhaps more importantly, her decision about whether to take up the pen depends upon the maternal impulses guiding her decisions about her step-daughter Pansy Osmond.

Within the pages of James's novel, Isabel Archer progresses from a child reading romantic novels in the isolation of her grandmother's library into a woman who attempts to engage in her own active model of reading the world, from a self-in-isolation to a somewhat fragmented self-in-relationship. She certainly spends time within the chrysalis, but Isabel encounters considerably more difficulty emerging from her reading isolation since she repeatedly shrinks away from doors and windows. Initially, like Jo March's escape to the apple tree, Isabel reads for romantic inspiration. "Seated alone with a book" in her grandmother's Albany office, Isabel "had an uncontrolled use of a library of full of books" (76). Instead of reading for knowledge, Isabel's reading is purely consumptive and superficial. She judges books by their covers, choosing novels on the basis of their decorative frontispieces, the same kind of imaginative but

uncritical judgment she uses when choosing a husband. As she isolates herself reading romances in the second floor library Isabel enjoys the mysterious seclusion of the old house, though James's description makes it sound a lot like her future house of suffocation with Gilbert Osmond. "The place owed much of its mysterious melancholy to the fact that it was properly entered from the second door of the house, the door that had been condemned, and that it was secured by bolts which a particularly slender little girl found it impossible to slide" (78). In addition to enjoying her sense of being physically trapped, Isabel is surrounded by windows but remains ignorant of the bustling world in the street below. "[S]he had no wish to look out for this world would have interfered with her theory that there was a strange, unseen place on the other side, a place which became, to the child's imagination, a region of delight or terror" theories for future thought and action, but the danger they represent is that they become her authoritative discourse before she has begun to establish her own internally persuasive discourse.<sup>12</sup>

Isabel's tendency to forgo looking out the windows of her reading library takes on special significance when viewed in relationship to Henry James's comments about the house of fiction in the Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady* discussed earlier. For James, the activity of the writer involves looking out windows, so Isabel's shrinking from such windows hints at her inability to write. But even though Isabel does not write, her love of reading earns her a favorable reputation, though it is a reputation based on a misreading of her. While James himself mocks Isabel, other characters tend to judge and admire her, because of her love of books: "[A]mong all her contemporaries she passed for a young woman of extraordinary profundity . . . a prodigy of learning reported to have read the classic authors--in translation" (110). Most characters in the novel do attribute to Isabel a kind of cleverness and



authority that she never really exhibits, perhaps because she appears so attractive on the surface. And while she's not yet worldly enough to read original texts, Isabel does attempt translated versions of them, including her reading of Gilbert Osmond who is, after all, not an original Italian, but a transplanted American. Isabel's penchant for reading even scares off potential suitors: "[T]hey had a fear that some special form or preparation was required for talking to her. Her reputation of reading hung around her like a cloudy envelope of a goddess in an epic" (88). This "cloud" of a reputation makes Isabel appear "bookish" and thus "blocks out" her original and romantic light, her desire for human interaction.

While Isabel "liked to be thought clever . . . she hated to be thought bookish" (89). Like the model of reading illustrated by the March family, Isabel wants to create a kind of continuity between her books and the world around her. However, though she loves romance and she likes to gain inspiration from reading, she is not fond of formal, book-learned education connected to reality. "She had a great desire for knowledge, but preferred almost any source of information to the printed page" (89). So while Isabel gets entertainment from books, she is unable to differentiate among different kinds of texts. When she does read about important historical events like the Civil War, she does not do so with the hope of understanding its political implications. Instead, Isabel casts the war as a romance: "she passed months in a state of almost passionate excitement in which she felt herself at times (to her extreme confusion) stirred almost indiscriminately by the valor of either army" (89). And just across the street from her grandmother's library is the Dutch school from which Isabel had been "offered the opportunity of laying a foundation of knowledge" but she had "protested against its laws and had been allowed to stay at home" (78).

While Isabel does not like to look out of windows, her “imagination was by habit ridiculously active; when the door was not opened it jumped out of the window. She [locks herself up physically, but she] was not accustomed indeed to keep [her imagination] behind bolts; and at important moments, when she would have been thankful to make use of her judgment alone, she paid the penalty of having given undue encouragement to the faculty of seeing without judging” (86). Isabel’s romantic tendencies and the overflow of her active imagination frequently collide with her sense of judgment, setting up the tension between imagination and reality which haunts Isabel on her sojourn to Europe.

This tension between the female imagination and good judgment is similar to Jo March’s conflict with the demands of polite society. Both heroines are struggling to understand the role that literacy plays in their own life plots, but motherless Isabel takes a very different journey than Jo’s path through domesticity and poverty. Once she leaves American soil and accompanies Mrs. Touchett to Europe, Isabel steps out of the library and into the text that is her “book of life.” Relying on books for imaginative feed and inspiration in the safety of her grandmother’s library is one thing, but when she steps outside of this childhood dwelling, Isabel’s habit of “seeing without judging” (86) has serious implications.

Henrietta chastises Isabel for using romance as a touchstone against which to judge experience, and for not relying enough on reality when she says:

‘the peril for you is that you live too much in the world of your own dreams. You’re not enough in contact with your own reality--with the toiling, striving, shuddering, I may even say sinning world around you. . . . You think you lead a romantic life . . . Whatever life you lead you must put your soul into it--to make any sort of success out of it; and from that moment on it ceases to be a romance, I assure you: it becomes grim reality! . . . You think we can escape disagreeable duties by taking romantic view--that’s your great illusion, my dear’. (267-268)

Isabel admits that she lives her life like she reads a book, enjoying unexpectedness (111) and exerting no control over the outcome. She has no sense of control over her future plot, but finds intrigue in the mystery of not knowing. "I haven't the slightest idea [where I'm going] and I find it pleasant not to know. A swift carriage, of a dark night, rattling with four horses over roads that one can't see--that's my idea of happiness" (219). Again, Isabel finds comfort in *not* assuming the responsibilities of literacy, in *not* looking out the windows, in *not* having what James calls "an individual vision [or] the pressure of the individual will." Henrietta aptly accuses Isabel of being "like the heroine of an immoral novel . . . you're drifting off to some great mistake" (219). For a writer like Henrietta, such a lack of control is dangerous; for Isabel, the reader, it is romantic.

Interestingly, once in Europe, Isabel reads books less and less even though her uncle's library was filled with "a complete set of authors" (153). She prefers to devote herself to "reading" the new scenes, people and plots which surround her at Gardencourt. She asks questions of Mr. Touchett about English life, "and in begging to be enlightened on these points she usually inquired whether they corresponded with the descriptions in the books," to which her uncle replies, "'The books? . . . well, I don't know much about the books. You must ask Ralph about that. I've always ascertained for myself -- got my information in the natural form'" (109), the implication being that Isabel's book-fed ideas are unnatural. When not involved in conversation, Isabel "was usually occupied in forming theories about her neighbors" (182). She reads paintings with Ralph and Warburton; she has human interactions in libraries. "Of late," she claims, "literature has seemed a fading light" (153) in her experiences of reading the world. Isabel does try to "lose herself in a

volume,” but life repeatedly interrupts, and she succeeds only in “reading other words than those printed on the page” (205). Critic Edgar Dryden agrees that once in Europe, “books for Isabel are little more than distractions. And even though she often holds and fingers them, she seldom reads them” (131). In Europe, the world around her becomes Isabel’s primary text.

Roslyn Jolly reminds us that all of Isabel’s important decisions in the novel “invariably occur as interruptions of her reading . . . This suggests a continuity between acting and reading which . . . places Isabel in the anti-romance tradition of female readers who confuse life and literature” (49).<sup>13</sup> Jolly connects the desires of James’s characters to fulfill their own romantic plots to patriarchy’s fears about excessive novel reading among women. “This late nineteenth century warning [against fiction] is continuous with the old evangelical argument that novels not only engendered dissatisfaction with the common circumstances of life, but were responsible for dangerous excitement of the imaginative folly” (39). James’s novels are thus part of an anti-fiction diatribe; they are “moral tales in which the novel-fed, deceived imagination was corrected by harsh reality” (40). In other words, they illuminate the dangers literacy poses to women.

It’s obvious that Isabel has been corrupted by her excessive reading. Isabel does see her experiences at Gardencourt as the realization of a romantic novel. When she meets Lord Warburton, her first remark is that of a novel reader: “Oh, I hoped there would be a lord; it’s just like a novel!” (70). When she thinks of Goodwood, it is in heroic images. She knows Goodwood, straight and stiff, runs a cotton factory in Boston, but “[i]t pleased Isabel to believe he might have ridden, on a plunging steed, the whirlwind of a great war” (170). This vision of Goodwood is lifted straight out of a fairy tale and ignores what Isabel comes to understand is the power and reality of Goodwood’s passion. She

also refers to novels when anticipating the treatment she might receive in England. "I don't believe [Europeans] are very nice to girls" she remarks. "[T]hey're not very nice to them in novels" (110). Daniel Touchett cautions Isabel about the accuracy of such novels when he replies "I don't know about the novels . . . I believe the novels have a great deal of ability, but I don't suppose they're very accurate. We once had a lady who wrote novels staying here . . . She was very positive, quite up to everything; but she was not the sort of person you could depend upon for evidence. Too free a fancy--I suppose that was it. She afterwards published a work of fiction in which she was understood to have given a representation--something in the nature of a caricature you might say--of my unworthy self. . . . Well, it was not at all accurate. . . . I just mention that to show you they're not always accurate" (110). But Isabel seems not to hear her uncle's warnings, warnings which sound a lot like James's own feelings about the inability of women writers to see the world realistically. Like a reader lost in a good book, she is isolated in her own ideas. "Sometimes she went as far as to wish that she might someday find herself some day in a difficult position, so that she could have the pleasure of being heroic, as the occasion demanded" (105). As if to hint at her pattern of misreading, James increasingly describes Isabel with metaphors of textual ineffectuality, of confused lines and vague thoughts. Her thoughts are a "tangle of vague outlines which had never been corrected by the voice of those speaking with authority" (104). Her ideas are a "thousand ridiculous zigzags" (104). The novel repeatedly argues that is that for a woman such confusion can be dangerous.

Isabel's reputation as a reader leads to rumors that "the girl would establish herself in print . . . [but Isabel] had never attempted to write a books and had no desire for the laurels of authorship" (102-3). Despite her many

original theories, her persistent imagination, and her love of reading, Isabel rarely put anything into print. When she does write, primarily letters to friends and family or because she is forced to by persistent rumors, Isabel's writing is ineffective, because she leaves important things out, bringing to mind Mr. Touchett's prior claims about inaccurate female novelists. For example, when she writes two long letters, one to her sister and one to Madame Merle, her interactions with Goodwood and Warburton are foremost in her mind, but "in neither of these epistles did she mention the fact that a rejected suitor had threatened her with another appeal" (342).

Isabel's most intense efforts at writing come in her courtship letters to Caspar Goodwood and Lord Warburton. Given Isabel's reputation as a reader, her belief that Goodwood "would somehow, somewhere, write himself in bigger letters" (170) appears to make them an apt reader-text match. But Goodwood's large letters and the passion of his traditional plot threaten Isabel's desire for freedom, though she seems unsure of what such freedom means. "The idea of a diminished liberty was particularly disagreeable to her." In her attempt to respond in writing to Caspar's letter, Isabel "felt a sense of incoherence" which left her "determined to leave [Goodwood's letter] a while unhonored" (171). She rejects his story line by refusing to write. Moreover, there are countless other incidents in the novel in which Isabel thinks about writing, but never actually follows through. Isabel fails to understand that all acts of creative reading must be completed by acts of writing.

When Isabel and Goodwood do finally speak about her rejection of his story, the pretext of their conversation is his eagerness for her to write letters and her hesitance to engage in the act of writing. Goodwood enters Isabel's hotel room, when she was "trying to lose herself in a volume which she had brought from Gardencourt . . . but she succeeded only to the extent of reading

other words than were on the page" (205). He immediately accuses Isabel of not writing and he explains that Henrietta is the one who wrote to him to explain Isabel's whereabouts. (All of Henrietta's letters to Goodwood arrive at their intended destination without interruption.) Isabel replies that "Henrietta never told me she was writing to you. . . . This is not kind of her" (206).

Goodwood continues: "I've been hoping every day for an answer to my letter. You might have written me a few lines" But Isabel claims that "It wasn't the trouble of writing that prevented me. I could as easily have written four pages as one. But my silence was an intention" (207). She then tells Goodwood that he should not have written to her at all. In the subtext of the conversation is Isabel's understanding that acts of reading and writing, of maintaining written correspondence, constitute an intimacy which she instinctually rejects.

Isabel's reluctance to write to Goodwood symbolizes her fear of his overt sexuality and her reluctance to let "the young man from Boston take positive possession of her" (168). When Goodwood leaves Isabel, with a "throbbing in her heart" she sees her emotion as "a thing to be ashamed of--it was profane and out of place" (217). She then sits down and tries again, unsuccessfully, to read. Isabel's fear of her own sexuality may also explain her later attraction to the relatively asexual Gilbert Osmond.

Isabel also reads Lord Warburton as a "hero of romance" (119). She is again trying to read a book and is interrupted by Goodwood's letter when Warburton appears. He appeals to her by likening his love to that in the novels she is so familiar with. He claims "it was love at first sight, as the novels say" (158). But when Isabel first suspects Warburton's attractions, she has not wish that "such a prelude should have a sequel" (153). She responds to Warburton's advances uncomfortably, by replying, "Perhaps I shall write to you" (163). Warburton admits, however, that Isabel's writing will be

meaningless to him, that he will not read her script, when he says “whatever you write, I’ll come and see you, you know” (163). In Isabel’s reluctance to engage in written correspondence with these suitors lies an understanding that in the act of inscription (especially public inscription) lies the potential to lose herself in someone else’s marriage plot. She admits that she imagines a greater story for herself: “She couldn’t marry Warburton; the idea failed to support . . . the free exploration of the life she had hitherto entertained . . . she must do something greater” (164). Isabel would rather continue to read until she finds a plot that allows her the potential of a more original course of action. She claims the reason for denying Warburton is that “we see our lives from our own point of view . . . and I shall never be able to see mine in the manner you propose” (172). This seems to get closer to identifying the difficulties Isabel has with her efforts to put together her own text. She, like James himself, seems unable to imagine anyone else’s perspective. At the heart of the literacy narratives of like Harriet Jacobs and Jo March is the ability to constantly shift their points of view in order to develop a sense of personal and moral responsibility which propels their acts of writing. Isabel’s own point of view remains undefined and she believes that adopting someone else’s point of view is a limitation of her freedom. So rather than assuming the role of observer in the house of fiction, or stepping outside, Isabel repeatedly seems to prefer melding into the architecture of the house itself, her surname Archer indicative of her integral role as part of the fictive structure, like the “neat and careful and proportioned pile of bricks that arches over it and was to form, constructionally speaking, a literary monument” (50). She thus functions as the architectural space in which other characters spin their webs.

When Isabel does finally write to Warburton, to turn down his marriage request, she struggles with a fear of sending the letter, a fear which continues



throughout the novel. She's afraid of sending the letter because to do so would be a rejection of the suitor and also of the "delightful story" of the romantic marriage. As of yet Isabel does not have an alternative plot to substitute. All the while Isabel tries to deter Warburton by promising to write to him, she carries Goodwood's unanswered letter in her pocket. She is literally surrounded by Goodwood's and Warburton's marriage scripts, with both suitors clamoring to get Isabel to play the lead role.

Isabel does deny Warburton's request in her letter, but the "missive" is not read. Warburton refuses to read it. Again and again, both suitors reappear at every turn, professing their love for Isabel and pleading for her hand in marriage. In doing so, they refuse acknowledge the fact that Isabel has closed the book on their particular romances. Warburton does, however, explain to Isabel that he had written her several letters after she refused him, but burned them up before he sent them (339). He, too, seems to understand the intimacy of such letters and respects Isabel's wishes not to renew such intimacy.

In addition to the possibility that Isabel refuses Goodwood and Warburton because their scripts are too confining, it is also possible that she rejects their stories because they do not offer her the potential for suffering that she knows is an essential part of a heroine's story. "It appeared to Isabel that the unpleasant has been ever too absent from her knowledge, for she had gathered from her acquaintance from literature that it was often a source of interest and even instruction. Her father had kept it away from her" (87). Isabel does not want her future script to hide unpleasantness, though she seems to confuse the experience of reading about pain and sacrifice from the reality of experiencing it. Goodwood's and Warburton's 'happily ever afters' would not incorporate this "great exclusion" (188). She explains to Warburton: "I can't escape happiness. In marrying you I shall be trying to. I'm not bent on

a life of misery . . . But it comes over me every now and then that I can never be happy in any extraordinary way; not by turning away, by separating myself . . . from life. From the usual chances and dangers, from what most people know and suffer” (186) from the knowledge that comes through experience. Isabel is eager to see the ghost of Gardencourt, even though Ralph explains that she is too innocent and happy to see the ghost. One must first have “suffered first, have suffered greatly, have gained some miserable knowledge” (101). Given the central role of suffering in the previous literacy narratives explored in this study, Isabel’s desire for some “miserable knowledge” may indeed be an important experience in her literate journey.

Isabel has other plots to erase as well. She is surrounded by eager authors, intent upon casting her as their heroine of their own stories. Isabel and Ralph’s potential marriage plot is certainly an underlying possibility throughout the novel, as both are characterized as readers, both of whom are “extremely fond of the unexpected” (203). Moreover, James refers to Isabel as being “written in a foreign tongue” while Ralph’s life is like “reading a good book in poor translation--a meager investment for a man who might have been an excellent linguist” (94). Bringing together these metaphors of the foreign text and the excellent linguist, we see that Isabel and Ralph, if not for the tragedy of Ralph’s illness, match together like pieces of a puzzle. As it is, Isabel seems to find her truest understanding of love through her relationship with her cousin.

But Ralph, for whom “to read between the lines was easier than to follow the text,” (174) understands that his illness limits his own potential, and so he opts instead to help Isabel with her own desire to experience life. He assumes the role of author-enabler and provides Isabel with the chance to live a life other than the typical love story by “putting a little wind in her sails” (234) in the form of an inheritance. “I should like to put it into her power to do

some of the things she wants” (235). He then assumes his position in the window. In effect, by making Isabel financially independent, Ralph is allowing her the freedom to be creative in her actions, and even, if she chooses, to write her own plot outside of the love story. In this sense, his function is similar to that of James himself, since Henry James sees the writer’s role as that of observer. What Ralph doesn’t know, and what James makes sure of, is that Isabel is incapable of steering her ship once it gains power and nearly ends up drowning herself.<sup>14</sup>

In contrast to Isabel’s romanticism, Henrietta Stackpole is rooted firmly in reality when she says to Ralph “I’m not talking about marrying characters. I’m talking about Isabel. Isabel’s intensely real” (173). Henrietta tries hard to script her own real life plot for Isabel’s future, working throughout the novel to bring Goodwood and Isabel together by feeding him letters with information about her whereabouts and advocating Goodwood’s potential to Isabel. She admits to Ralph her goal: “[Isabel’s] not the bright American girl she was . . . I’ve a fear in my heart she’s going to marry one of those fell Europeans and I want to prevent it . . . No; I wish her [to marry] a young man she once gave great encouragement and whom she now doesn’t seem to think good enough” (174)--Caspar Goodwood. Henrietta does, however, succeed in writing her own love story with Mr. Bantling, a story which Isabel criticizes for its unoriginal story line: “It was a disappointment to find . . . that her intimacy with Mr. Bantling had not been completely original. There was a want of originality in her marrying him” (612). Isabel’s opinion of Henrietta’s marriage, given her own poor choice, indicates her poor judgment and her continued illusions about originality.

While Isabel, the reader, manages to escape the plots penned for her by Henrietta the journalist, Mrs. Touchett the cryptic telegraphist, Ralph the

linguist, the romantic hero Warburton and Goodwood's big letters, she does not reject the script Madame Merle writes for her. In fact, Isabel wholeheartedly places herself within the pages of Madame Merle's text, like a motherless daughter searching for a role model, like an orphan seeking a lost family story:

It took no great harm for [Isabel] to feel herself, as the phrase is, under an influence. 'What's the harm,' she wondered, 'so long as it's a good one? The more one's under an influence the better. The only thing is to see our steps as we can take them--to understand them as we go. That, no doubt, I shall always do. I needn't be afraid of becoming too pliable; isn't it my fault that I'm not pliable enough?' (242)

At this moment, Isabel is totally incapable of seeing the danger of losing one's sense of self in another's text. She is "warped clean out of her orbit," she is "awestruck" by Madame Merle's "attraction." The irony of Isabel's attraction to Madame Merle is that she is *not* seeing her own steps, nor is she understanding them as she goes. She imagines that the influence of Madame Merle is "good" when it is in fact evil. But Isabel, "who had seen very little of the evil of the world" (105) literally trips herself up; she reads wrongly by losing touch with reality. This time, however, the stakes are much higher. Madame Merle "had yet to Isabel's imagination a sort of greatness" (243). She seems to revert back to childhood (in her interactions with Madame Merle, Isabel is repeatedly referred to as a child and as being childish) and loses herself in the text of Madame Merle, like Ellen Montgomery's loss of self in religious texts.

Madame Merle sets up Isabel to manipulate her as a reader, promising that "she would have a tale to unfold" (245), a tale which Isabel assures her "she would delight to listen to" (245) but which Merle keeps secret throughout. However, from the moment she meets Madame Merle, Isabel Archer becomes a victim of her passive, romantic habit of reading. In these romantic visions and the misguided belief that Madame Merle is her friend, she reads Madame

Merle as the model story she needs to gain control over the text of her life. Most important for Isabel, Madame Merle “knew how to think--an accomplishment rare in women” (240). She feels Madame Merle has the necessary knowledge, the knowledge gained through suffering, that Isabel yet needs. “I’m afraid you’ve suffered much . . . [because] you sometimes say things that I think people who have always been happy wouldn’t have found out” (244). In this instance Isabel sees in Serena Merle the kind of intrigue that keeps her reading and while Isabel is misreading Madame Merle as a friend, she is also reading Merle’s history of suffering quite accurately. Isabel does, however, misread Merle’s intentions by reading too much into her: she seems Merle as honorable when she is in fact manipulative. It is because Isabel is in such a habit of reading passively that she cannot conceive of the possibility of evil represented by Merle. Neither does she any need to become a more resisting reader.

When she meets Madame Merle at Gardencourt, Isabel is lured out of the library and into the salon where she gives Merle a cursory reading. At first our “speculative heroine” imagines Madame Merle is a Frenchwoman. When she realizes her error, Isabel supposes it to be all the better, for even “as the opposite supposition made her romantic . . . rarer even than to be French, it seemed, to be American on such interesting terms” (226). Isabel’s book-fed romanticisms lead her to cast Madame Merle in the image of a “German of high degree, perhaps an Austrian, a baroness, a countess, a princess” (338). Isabel tries desperately to fit Madame Merle into the romantic mold, trying to read her as part of a familiar text. Isabel misreads Serena Merle because she believes Merle has the good sense “not to pretend . . . [but] to express herself by original signs” (244). The danger here is that for the first time, Isabel encounters a text that she (in all her honesty and purity) cannot imagine.

Instead of seeing Madame Merle's text for what it is--self-serving and manipulative--she imagines Merle is the story model she has been desperately searching for--the truly independent woman.

This is Isabel's tragic error. She's reading a mystery, yet "with all her love of knowledge, she had a natural shrinking from raising curtains and looking into windows. The love of knowledge co-existed with the finest capacity for ignorance" (251). As a child, not looking out of the windows in her grandmother's library was a harmless isolation, but in her interaction with Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond, Isabel's refusal to look has far graver implications. It is this refusal to look that leads Isabel to misread their intentions and her intended role as tragic heroine. Even as Madame Merle and Osmond accuse each other of being as unoriginal "as sentences in a copy-book" (571) Isabel believes in their originality.

Once she has committed her error in reading Madame Merle, Isabel repeats it by reading too much into Gilbert Osmond. "Her imagination supplied the human element [to his life] she was sure had not been wanting" (316). When Isabel first meets Osmond, he does not lure her with a romantic plot like Goodwood and Warburton. In fact, he encourages her to experience the world and to travel on her own. Osmond also speaks to her in textual metaphors, requesting that she "not put him in parenthesis, but give him a chapter to himself" (357). He compares himself to a poet, calling her his muse. He characterizes himself as the reader of a romantic story, setting up Isabel as someone who helps him to read his "book of life" (402).

'It's just as when one has been trying to spell out a book in the twilight and suddenly the lamp comes in. I had been putting my eyes out over the book of life and I find nothing to reward me for my pains; but now that I can read it properly, I see it's a delightful story'. (402)

In this passage, Osmond lures Isabel by speaking to her as if she is the lamp enabling him to see his “book of life” more clearly. Side by side with Osmond, Isabel believes they are reading the same text, that of their future together. She also believes that Osmond understands her desire to collaborate on their life together and that he will give her the opportunity to do so. When she leaves Osmond in Rome to continue her travels throughout Europe, Isabel casts their parting as if it is a scene out of a romance novel. Even though they are saying good-bye to each other, Isabel lapses into a semi-dream state. She

was thinking that [it had been] the pleasantest moment of her life--so it pleased her to qualify these too few days in Rome, which she might musingly have likened to the figure of some small princess of one of the ages of dress overmuffled in a mantle of state and dragging a train that it took pages or historians to hold up--that this felicity was coming to an end . . . But she said to herself that if there were a danger that they should never meet again, perhaps after all it would be as well. Happy things don't repeat themselves, and her adventure were already the changed, the seaward face of some romantic island from which, after feasting upon purple grapes, she was putting off while the breeze rose. (359)

Isabel mistakenly thinks of Osmond as her own *jeune fille*, a blank page, a “vague, unexplained American” (299) who she will be able to construct her own reading of. She sees Osmond as “nobody and nothing . . . he's not in business . . . he's not rich, he's a perfect nonentity” (380). He has a “well bred air of expecting nothing” (298). He represents her search for something truly original, since “he was an original without being an eccentric” (312). She looks forward to their relationship as to the reading of a good book: “She was certainly far from understanding him completely; his meaning was not at all times obvious [but] she trusted she would learn more in time; it would be very interesting to learn” (312). Isabel thinks of her relationship to Osmond as almost maternal, calling her desire to help him a “maternal strain,” (476) an

effort to make something out of him like Ralph wanted to make something of her. While Ralph want to fill her sails, she thinks that “she would launch [Osmond’s] boat for him; she would be his providence” (476). For Isabel, Osmond’s greatest quality is that “he has done nothing that has had to be undone” (322). She acts with love, confidence and trust that in marrying she will “see the dreams of her youth come true” (252).

But it is in this marriage that the dreams end and the reality begins for Isabel. She seems to shrink from any kind of passion in her relationship with Osmond, and the mothering impulse which lies at the heart of her attraction to him is reminiscent of the other acts of mothering in the novel--doomed to failure. James’s insistence on the perversion of the maternal impulse and the consequent inability of any woman to become literate, works to subvert the relationship between the maternal impulse and the experience of literacy as illustrated in the literacy narratives of marginalized writers like Alcott and Jacob. In fact, the Isabel-Osmond relationship is in many ways a perversion of literate bond which develops between Jo March and Professor Bhaer and between Ellen Montgomery and John Humphreys. The interpenetration of Isabel’s failed marriage and her misguided efforts at being maternal signal that Isabel has fallen victim to her own irresponsible habits of reading.

Isabel explains to Ralph that she sees Gilbert Osmond as the opposite of Lord Warburton because he has none of the great advantages. Osmond has “no property, no title, no honours, no houses, nor lands, nor position, nor reputation, nor brilliant belonging of any sort. It’s the complete absence of all these things that pleases me. Mr. Osmond’s simply a very lonely, a very cultivated, and a very honest man--he’s not a prodigious proprietor” (398). But Ralph, who reads more clearly than any other character in the novel, knows that Isabel’s tendency to read romantically has led her to completely misread



Osmond, who has more hidden stories than any character in the novel. Ralph knows that Isabel “was wrong, but she believed; she was deluded, but she was dismally consistent. It was wonderfully characteristic of her that, having invented a fine theory about Gilbert Osmond, she loved him not for what he really possessed, but for his very poverties dressed as honors” (398). Isabel has certainly read Gilbert Osmond creatively, but in the process she has lost touch with reality. Isabel only gradually comes to understand that she had been attracted to the man not because of who he was, but because of who she imagined he could be; not because of what he really held, but “rather what he withheld that marked him for her” (312). When Isabel finally looks under the covers, she tragically discovers that Osmond is nothing more than “an obscure American dilettante, a middle-aged widower with an uncanny child and an ambiguous income” (324). She realizes that there are many layers of the text that is Osmond, that “she had seen only half his nature then” but she “saw the whole man now” (475).

Osmond himself, has played along with Isabel, allowing her to believe that he was more than willing to accommodate her desire for creativity. But in reality, as her husband, her “appointed and inscribed master,” (510) Osmond is authoring his own patriarchal text, in which Isabel plays the part of dutiful, silent, and passive wife. Once married, Osmond believes that Isabel “had too many ideas” (477). He would like for her “to have nothing of her own other than her appearance” (477). In essence, like Henry James himself, Osmond fights against Isabel’s efforts to become literate, requiring that she “have no freedom of mind . . . [and knowing] well that Ralph was an apostle of freedom,” (510), Osmond thus forbids Isabel that interaction with her cousin necessary for her active reading of the world. Isabel enters into her marriage believing she and Osmond will collaborate, but he considers himself alone the artist, and he sees

Isabel as his “muse” (356). Osmond imagines Isabel as his object, one of his many prized possessions, given to him by Madame Merle. In Osmond’s estimation

What could be a happier gift in a companion than a quick, fanciful mind which saved one repetitions and reflected one’s thoughts on a polished elegant surface? Osmond hated to see his thought reproduced literally--that made it look stale and stupid; he preferred it to be freshened in the reproduction, even as ‘words’ by music. His egotism had never taken the form of desiring a dull wife; this lady’s intelligence was to be a silver plate . . .--a plate he might heap up with ripe fruits to which it would give a decorative value . . . he found the silver quality in this perfection in Isabel; he could tap her imagination with his knuckle and make it ring (401).

Gilbert Osmond does not want Isabel to be an original, but prefers her to create a copy through a reproduction of his own genius, reflecting back at himself. “Her mind was to to be his--attached to his own like a small garden-plot to a deer-park” (481).

When the Countess Gemini finally draws aside the curtain, she acts like Professor Bhaer’s glasses, which Jo March slips on to see things clearly. But despite Gemini’s new revelations, Isabel still remains lost in the unexpected turns of the plot,” and “almost lost her sense of being personally touched by the story” (593). She “stared at her companion’s story as at a bale of fantastic wares some strolling gypsy might have unpacked at the carpet at her feet” (591). Isabel, for all her pride in her ridiculously active imagination, can only describe what she learns about Madame Merle as “well--unimaginable.” Indeed, without Countess Gemini’s assistance in reading, her “aid to innocent ignorance,” (589) Isabel would never have imagined that “Madame Merle has married her” nor that she “had not read [Osmond] right” (476).

Once Isabel begins, in the light of her “deepening experience,” (like Jo March’s experience of her sister’s death) to reread her history with Osmond,

she finally reads clearly and sees that “Madame Merle had married her” (564). Isabel admits that she had imagined a world of things that had no substance and that she married her own “factitious theory” (477). “In the light of deepening experience” (475), “Isabel read all of this as she would have read the hands on a clock face” (480). She “asked herself, with an almost childlike horror of the supposition, whether to this intimate friend of several years the historical epithet of *wicked* were to be applied. She knew the idea only by the Bible and other literary works; to the best of her belief she had no personal acquaintance with wickedness. . . . Isabel’s Aunt Lydia had made the discovery long before, and had mentioned it to her niece, but Isabel had flattered herself at this time that she had a much richer view of things, especially of the spontaneity of her own career and the nobleness of her own interpretations” (565).

Once Isabel realizes her tragic mistake, she continues to hold onto the romantic notion that she must bear her pain in silence and allow Osmond complete narrative authority. In an eerie transformation, the happy isolation of the Albany library becomes Osmond’s “house of darkness, house of dumbness, the house of suffocation” (478). And as if to remind her of her error, “Osmond’s beautiful mind seemed to peep down from a small window and mock her” (478) as does James’s own fictive imagination. Isabel explains that she cannot “publish her mistake” (536) by leaving Osmond, because to do so would violate her own sense of the sacredness of her one original act. Even though Henrietta encourages Isabel to leave Osmond, and in effect create an alternate story line, Isabel is imprisoned within the patriarchal marriage text. She sees her life with Osmond as the “most serious act--of her life” (511) which cannot be revised. She refuses to write a new plot. “No chapter of the past was more perfectly irrecoverable” (544); she remains trapped in her isolation, unable to

break through.

Isabel is trapped by Osmond's plot, one in which he expects her to forget her ideas and live according to his scripted plan. For Osmond, who "likes his women like his books, not too long," (286) imagining "a woman reader as anything other than a validation of his own texts is as incomprehensible as a woman's story" (Fetterley 147). In fact, Osmond, like James himself, does not even recognize that Isabel has a potential story of her own. The power of the female writer threatens Osmond, which is why he feels such antagonism toward Henrietta, who

strikes [him] as kind of a monster. One hasn't a nerve in one's body that she doesn't set quivering. You know I have never admitted that she's a woman. Do you know what she reminds me of? Of a new steel pen--the most odious thing in nature. She talks as a new steel pen. Aren't her letters, by the way, on ruled paper? She thinks and moves and walks and looks exactly as she talks. You may say that she doesn't hurt me, inasmuch as I don't see her, but I hear her; I hear her all day long. Her voice is in my ears I can't get rid of it. (538)

Osmond says of the imagination of all women: "It's always vulgar at bottom [like] a third rate novelist" (568), echoing the similar words of James himself.

Because of her passive habit of reading, Isabel has no experience with an active literacy. She seems initially to believe that she she has no autonomy as a creator of alternative plot lines. She seems unable to imagine other potential courses of action. She refuses the possibility of divorcing, that is, of putting Osmond's text aside. She seems unable to write her own, or to continue reading in search of a better one. She seems to believe that she must continue to be a character in her husband's text, to accept his definition of reality. Isabel assents, "push[ing] away the book she has been reading" and explaining to Osmond that she is "determined to try and act as [he likes]" (468). Doing so, of course requires that she deny her desire to generate her own

script.

Osmond's secondary script, which mirrors Isabel's own in many ways, is that of Pansy's marriage. Osmond sees Pansy as the "ideal jeune fille" as a blank canvas upon which he will perform his artistry. Isabel she sees it as her duty to fulfill his patriarchal text, to help him bring about the intended marriage between Pansy and Warburton, and thus cover "so fair and smooth a page" with what Osmond considers "an edifying text" (328). "It seems that is she could make it her duty to bring about such an event she should play the part of a good wife" (464). She feels it is her duty "to recognize nothing unless Osmond had put it into words" (469) and to "hold her tongue" (516) even though doing so would be to hasten the death of Pansy, who "looked to Isabel like a childish martyr decked out for sacrifice" (516).

Osmond cannot imagine Pansy as having her own story either, though Isabel tells him that Pansy is in love with Ned Rosier. She exists only as a blank page. Pansy, for her part, does play the role Osmond requires of her and accommodates his desire for a complete surrender to his authority. Like Ellen Montgomery, she was "evidently impregnated with the idea of submission, which was due to anyone who took the tone of authority; and she was a passive spectator in the operation of her fate" (286).

Judith Fetterley sees this struggle for control of textuality as a struggle over the definition of reality. In the struggle for Pansy's story, Isabel does succeed in erasing Osmond's intended plot by subtly encouraging Warburton to back off by not sending the letter to Osmond asking for Pansy's hand. At first, however, she does not write her own version of Pansy's marriage. Instead, she prefers to "right" Pansy's situation by expressing what she feels is the proper course of action for Osmond to take and allowing Pansy the freedom to make her own choices. Isabel reads the situation most clearly when she says

“[t]here was nothing more honorable than for him to leave the poor child alone. She cares for another person and it’s cruel to attempt to bribe her” (513). In this capacity, Isabel assumes a role which is the closest things to effective mothering, and to authoring an alternative plot for herself and for Pansy.

Isabel’s actions at the novel’s end, her two most important decisions, emerge out of that sense of moral and maternal responsibility. Before she discovers Madame Merle and Osmond’s treachery, Isabel believes her responsibility is to her husband. When Osmond demands that she obey him by not going to Gardencourt, his words represent to Isabel the letter of the law, “something transcendent and absolute, like the sign of the cross or the flag of one’s county. He spoke in the name of something sacred and precious--the observance of magnificent form. They were as perfectly apart in feeling as two disillusioned lovers had ever been; but they had not yet separated in act” (583). But once Countess Gemini unveils the truth, Isabel begins to live by that truth rather than by her sense of the romantic. Her proper course shifts to those she feels deserve her attention: Ralph and Pansy. This also signals the shift in James’s own sympathies from Osmond’s oppressive patriarchal plot to Isabel’s alternative matriarchal plot. This realization, while tragic and painful, allows Isabel to finally act, to openly defy Osmond’s wishes when she rushes back to Gardencourt to be with her dying cousin. Osmond has destroyed Isabel’s romantic vision and the region of delight she imagined as a child has become a region of terror. But once she comes to understand this, Isabel is able to return to Gardencourt and consider re-writing her story. She is beginning to learn how to be metaliterate: to read various scripts and to reject those which restrict her, and to reconcile opposing stories by interweaving their plots, through a more sophisticated act of literacy. She is finally able to make the shift from romance to reality, from misreading to reading critically.

For the first time, Isabel speaks to Ralph with no desire to romanticize things. She wishes him to know everything about her tragic reality. Nothing matters to Isabel but “the knowledge that they were looking at the truth together. ‘He married me for the money’ she said” (621) to Ralph before he dies. After Ralph’s death, Isabel is again trying to read when Warburton arrives at Gardencourt. “She had never been less interested in literature . . . as she found when she occasionally took down from the shelf one of the rare and valuable volumes . . . She was quite unable to read; her attention had never been so little at her command” (628). For the first time Isabel’s “eyes wandered from the book in her hand to the open window, which looked down along the long avenue” (628). Now, finally venturing to look out the window, to assume the author’s role, she sees Warburton arrive, but flees out to the garden to avoid meeting him.

Isabel’s final scene at Gardencourt is literally a revision of her experience in the beginning, a retrospective view of her history. When Caspar Goodwood surprises her in the garden, “[i]t occurred to [Isabel] in the midst of this that it was just so Lord Warburton had surprised her of old” (631). She sees the bench she is sitting on as “an historical, an interesting bench; she stood and looked at it as if it might have something to say to her. She wouldn’t sit on it now -- she felt rather afraid of it. She only stood before it. and while she stood the past came back to her in one of those rushing waves of emotion by which persons of sensibility are visited at odd hours” (631). Isabel’s sense of her personal history, her choices and rejections, revisit her. Goodwood “who had dropped out of her books” (533) offers Isabel the chance to revise her story, to flee from the pain and suffocation of her life with Osmond. But for Isabel, letting Goodwood’s passion overcome her would be like dying and losing herself in his text, his sexual aggression. Perhaps she is afraid of the

passionate self inside her, perhaps she is afraid of being swallowed up in his power as she had been by Osmond. Perhaps she is afraid of this action because her own previous sacred original act proved to be a failure, but she closes the book on Caspar Goodwood's daring adventure plot. It is not her story.

Instead, Isabel Archer returns to Rome. While Isabel is able to help Pansy avoid an entrapment with Warburton like she fell prey to with Osmond, the novel leaves us with the question of whether Isabel herself will take up the pen and revise her own story, as Madame Merle did, by protecting Pansy from her father's tyranny. For Isabel, such a revision would be, in the words of Audre Lorde, "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction . . . an act of survival" (149). While it appears that Isabel has learned, through her experiences of failed reading, of the need to read critically, in active connection with reality and a sense of moral responsibility, it remains unclear what Isabel will do with her new knowledge. Does Isabel's return to Rome mean she will fulfill her promise to help Pansy; in other words, will her identity as a mother impel her to author a new script? Or has Isabel committed herself to Osmond's prison? James leaves that question "en l'air" as Isabel Archer remains stranded between Gardencourt and Rome. As of the novel's premature ending, Isabel Archer has not yet found a story of her own, nor has she mastered the art of inscription.

If, as I have argued previously, we read this novel as Henry James's own literacy narrative, this premature ending has many implications, both for James and for the many readers participating in Isabel's journey back to Rome. Leaving Isabel with so many choices, and a strong sense of maternal duty at the end of the novel is a rather sympathetic reading of her



predicament. For the first time in the novel, there is a possibility that Isabel, newly described as a “person of sensibility,” will be able to act, not according to her romantic notions, but in a realistic manner which takes into consideration her responsibilities to someone other than herself. This sympathy is evident in Ralph’s words on his deathbed: “You wanted to look at life yourself--but you were not allowed; you were punished for your wish. . . . And remember this, that if you’ve been hated, you’ve also been loved. Ah, but Isabel--*adored*” (622-23).

For Henry James, abdicating such an important responsibility to Isabel represents a subtle backing off from his manipulative and heavy handed characterizations of her ignorance. By leaving Isabel with the skills of a critical reader, in control of her own destiny, he comes closest to a sympathetic rereading of the New Woman who has been the victim of her “factitious theories” and literate shortcomings. Henry James has manipulated Isabel to the brink of tragedy, rehabilitated her as a reader, stepped back, and handed her his pen. One gets the sense from James’s characterization of Isabel at the end of the novel that she will not repeat the mistakes that she has made; that she has matured and will repeat with Gilbert Osmond the scene of revisionary history which precedes her departure from Gardencourt.<sup>15</sup>

In this process of rehabilitating Isabel, James himself has become a better reader. This ending indicates that he has retreated from his effort of mastery and that he has grown more comfortable with the gaps and the inconclusiveness of life. James has grown comfortable inviting others into his house of fiction or at least in stepping outside its walls himself. The subtleness of the ending reveals that James has begun to question his own “factitious theories” about the inexperience of women readers and writers, and gained a deeper appreciation for the ambiguities and inconsistencies which affect an

individual's process of literateness, including his own. In short, Isabel's drama of reading has also taught Henry James to read more in connection with reality. This lesson guides him in his future literary endeavors as the ambiguity of this ending takes center stage in the novels which follow in James's literary career.<sup>16</sup>

This kind of ambiguity also functions as a lesson in literacy for James's audience, which finds itself at the end of this novel in a position which mirrors that of his female heroine. We too, are handed Henry James's pen. Through Isabel, we are forced to supply the ending to *The Portrait of a Lady*, to complete our own complex process of reading with an act of writing.<sup>17</sup> In doing so, we define the role that literacy will have in Isabel's future; we each take the place of Henry James by scripting the ending which he chooses not to provide. In relying on the powers of our own imaginations to provide this ending, we ultimately confront our own understanding of literacy. Henry James forces us to engage in the process of sifting through the various plots and scripts and negotiating all the different possibilities for Isabel in order to come to a workable conclusion for her. This also involves a reading of James himself. Putting into play this kind of participatory reading is perhaps the novel's deepest insight into the meaning of the literate act. Henry James, taught by Isabel Archer, also teaches us that every experience of reading must be completed by our own act of writing, an act which always requires us to read beyond the ending.

## NOTES FOR CHAPTER V

1. Many critics have established and discussed the autobiographical elements in *The Portrait of a Lady*. In the "Introduction" to the Penguin Classics edition of the novel, Geoffrey Moore writes that "[t]here is . . . something of Henry James in Isabel Archer (10)." Moore outlines some of the similarities in Isabel and James's childhood experiences. Leon Edel, in his biography of James, claims that Isabel and Osmond are "two sides of the same coin--two studies in egotism--and a kind of egotism which belonged to their author" (258). William Veeder sees the novel as autobiography, claiming that reading it "requires us to see how diverse James's self-representation is, how many characters reflect him" (104). See "The Portrait of a Lack." Rosslyn Jolly also addresses the autobiographical elements of the novel in her book-length study of James, *Henry James: History, Narrative Fiction*.

2. In "Realism, Ideology and the Novel in American (1886-1896): Changing Perspectives in the Work of Mark Twain, W.D. Howells and Henry James," Robert Weimann discusses *The Bostonians* as Henry James's response to the women's reform movement. Weimann claims that James "in representing some of the defeats and illusions of the feminist movement of his day, . . . satirically challenges the most recent and, at the same time, the most hallowed ideologies of the contemporary causes of bourgeois reform and progress" (205). In "Swept Away: Henry James, Margaret Fuller and 'The Last of the Valerii,'" John Carlos Rowe argues that James, "despite his rejections of his romantic forbearers, shared his literary fathers' inability to deal with feminist issues." Rowe addresses the question of Woman, "as writer, intellectual, socially constructed gender and as 'literary character'--in the heritage of American modernism" (34) by exploring Henry James's reading of Margaret Fuller. According to Rowe, James's reading of Fuller involves a series of distortions and misrepresentations similar to the kind of misreading I argue that James gives to literate women in general. As a case in point, James creates a kind of invisible caricature of Fuller in Osmond's mother, who he names "The American Corinne" the same label given to Fuller herself.

For more on Henry James's attitude toward women writers and feminism, see Alfred Habegger, *Henry James and the Woman Business*.

3. Priscilla L. Walton presents a similar thesis in *The Disruption of the Feminine in Henry James*. Walton argues that "the novel suggests that Isabel is free to choose, but that because she is female and hence somewhat irrational and unstable, she will choose irrationally. The text, therefore, works to justify patriarchal authority, for the circumspection of women is presented as a kindness, a means of helping them to help themselves" (52-53).

Habegger presents a similar analysis, summing up what he calls "James's muted lesson: even the freest American woman dreams of submission to a dominating master" (61).

4. Habegger argues that James was reacting to his own paternalistic oppression and that the character of Isabel is a revision of his strong-minded

cousin Minny Temple. See "The Fatherless Heroine and the Filial Son: Deep Background for *The Portrait of a Lady*"

5. For more on James's relationship with the reading public, see Jolly, pages 84-85. See also Edel, pages 247-249.

6. Jolly describes this as part of a larger cultural trend in the fiction marketplace at the end of the century, "including the disintegration of shared social values and literary conventions, . . . the increasing fragmentation of the reading public and concomitant hardening of the lines between highbrow and lowbrow fiction [which led to] an atmosphere of 'intensifying mutual hostility between writers and readers of fiction'" (82-83). She identifies a "cultural pattern of pinning anxiety about fiction onto the reading behavior of marginal groups . . . [by] perpetuating irresponsible and dangerous acts of readership and authorship in which James's own enterprise is deeply implicated" (85).

7. Beth Sharon Ash claims that "Isabel's self-sufficiency is an explicit theme, the absent mother an implicit one." She asks "How then shall we read this combination of the lack of maternal care and the daughter's independence?" (131). For a further discussion on the role of mothering in *The Portrait of a Lady*, see Ash's article, "Frail Vessels and Vast Designs" A Psychoanalytic Portrait of Isabel Archer."

8. See Note 1.

9. Debra Humphreys' Foucauldian reading of Jacobs' confinement is helpful in articulating the differences in Isabel's literate practices. Humphreys argues that Jacobs subverts the power relations of public and private spaces by constantly appropriating and redefining liminal or marginal spaces, by reversing the "gaze" which functions as the surveying apparatus. The narrative "reveals the imbalances and instabilities in power relations that open up these spaces of resistance and loopholes of retreat" (149). Isabel, on the other hand, never seems to gain any kind of consciousness of the surveying apparatus, which is Madame Merle, nor does she seem interested in interrupting or reversing the gaze. See Debra Humphreys, "Power and Resistance in Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*."

10. Roslyn Jolly discusses the similarities between James and his characters' activities, arguing that James's heroes and heroines "combine interpretation and compositional skills to become dangerous imitators of the novelist's task" (41). If these two male characters are representations of James himself, then Ralph seems to represent the possibility for romance and Osmond, the potential for tragedy.

11. I have spent some time reading the diaries of Alice James, Henry's sister in an effort to try and understand how Alice's isolation and her literacy might help us to understand James's attitude about female literacy. Alice wrote her

journals while an invalid in England between 1889 and 1892, nearly ten years after the novel was published. Henry James did not want the diary published and destroyed his privately printed copy. Leon Edel describes Henry's relationship with Alice during her illness as an ambivalent one of "delicate moral bondage." Henry wrote of Alice's writing that she "exercised her wondrous vigor of judgment on too small a scrap of what really surrounded her" (18) and he also claimed that reading the diary "puts before me what I was tremendously conscious of in her lifetime--that the extraordinary intensity of her will and personality really would have made the equal, the reciprocal life of a "well" person--in the usual world--almost impossible to her--so that her disastrous, her tragic health was in a manner the only solution for her of the practical problem of life--as it suppressed the element of equality, of reciprocity" (19). James's description of Alice's illness as the solution to the impossibility of a fruitful interaction with the world, brings to mind the isolating and rather narcissistic quality of Isabel's literacy as a solution for her practical problem, her failure to achieve a true reciprocity in life. The irony of Alice's literacy is that she wrote in great opinionated detail about social and political developments as if she were a participant in them all, through she was never more than a distant spectator. Alice's literacy seems little more than a pattern of consumptive responses to outside developments which provided, in James's estimation, a substitute for a healthy interaction with the world. This is just the beginning of my thinking on this subject, and greater attention to James's attitude about his sister's literacy would be a fruitful course of future study.

12. Isabel's situation is very similar to that of Ellen Montgomery. Ellen learns to deny her own internally persuasive discourse in favor of the authoritative discourse of the religious literature she reads. Isabel never seems to develop or to be able to identify her own internally persuasive discourse. She confuses her own sense of self with the fictional heroines she reads about.

13. Jolly's argument focuses specifically on different kinds of narratives, fiction versus history. In arguing that this novel is part of the anti-romance tradition, she sets up her claim that James sees the novel as privileging the historical narrative as presented by the voice of the narrator. Jolly's work is similar to Habegger's in that exploring *The Portrait of a Lady* as an anti-romance, sets the novel up in opposition to the kind of romantic narrative Isabel is so fond of. Jolly sees the characters in *The Portrait* as engaged in a struggle for narrative authority in which the "action consists of the interplay between the various plots launched by the characters which compete for the power of shaping reality and with the facts as given by the narrator's version of events for the status of history . . . the characters' plots are unable to make a lasting impression on reality and in the end are defeated by incontrovertible truths represented by the narrator's historical record" (37).

14. Here we have another ship metaphor which has occurred in most of the literacy narratives in this study. As with Ellen Montgomery, Isabel's ship is propelled by forces outside her control (Ralph's providing the inheritance) and

once her sails are filled, she loses control of the direction of the craft, much like Ellen who gives up control to John Humphreys. In the final scene at Gardencourt, however, these metaphors reappear in Isabel's struggle with Caspar Goodwood. She is described in the scene as struggling to stay afloat, though she "felt herself sink and sink. In the movement she seemed to beat with her feet, in order to catch herself, to feel something to rest on. . . . She had heard of those wrecked and under water following a train of images before they sink. But when the darkness returned she was free" (635-6).

15. In the final scene with Goodwood, Isabel's failure as a mother comes up again. Goodwood mentions that since Isabel has no children, she is more free to leave her marriage to Osmond. Isabel, however, has a sense of maternal duty to Pansy.

16. This ambiguity is typical of James's later female heroines, like Daisy Miller or the governess in the *Turn of the Screw*. This kind of ambiguity changes the role of the reader considerably, calling for a more interactive model of reading, like the sophisticated reading of Josephine March in *Little Women*.

17. I am probably falling into the same pattern as Isabel by putting a rather positive or romantic reading onto this ending, by implying that by the end of the novel James was no longer locked into cultural assumptions about gender and literacy. In fact, it remains rather inconclusive. An alternative reading is that the ending only further reinforces James's ambivalence about the relationship between literacy and femininity. Does Isabel represent his refusal to accept the premise of an independent literate female, and his effort to provide a female antidote to the power of such successful female writers as Ruth Hall and Jo March? Ralph Touchett, that aspect of James's fictive imagination which created for Isabel the possibility of independence, has died. And Osmond, the sinister part of James's fictive imagination which takes away Isabel's ability to thrive through the active use of her imagination, continues to haunt and possibly infect Isabel's future chances for survival.

The ending of this novel has been the topic of numerable critical conversations. Virginia Fowler, in *Henry James's American Girl: The Embroidery on the Canvas*, argues that Isabel returns to Osmond in order to continue her education: "Although she has become aware, by the novel's end, of the many ways in which she was earlier deluded, the mechanism that led to her youthful self-delusions is still functioning. She must somehow make meaningful the suffering she experiences, and the final chapters of the novel dramatize her creation of constructs that will render her experiences rational and valuable" (77).

William Veeder believes that "James leaves his protagonist suspended between departure and arrival, poised between separation and commitment. . . . Isabel is alone, yet not solipsistic, neither exposed nor dead. Her train ride is a timeless suspension" (117). He sees this as James's own lifelong dilemma: "how to love, and yet maintain enough distance to escape the exposure inevitable with intimacy; how to remain in life, but not of it" (118).

Priscilla Walton argues that in this ending we are being manipulated like Isabel into the “illusion that we are ‘freely choosing.’ . . . Despite James’s contention that his text may appear unfinished, it attempts to affect closure. In doing so, it invites readers to ignore the paradoxes it manifests and to believe that both they and Isabel are autonomous and free agents. . . yet by inviting readers to effect closure, the text again negates any possibility of freedom for the reader, since it dictates the way it should be read . . . But the readers do not have to follow the overt codes. And if they do not, the text become less coherent and indeed, is left *‘en ‘lair’* . . . rather than closing the text . . . readers can open it out and refuse to abide by its stated rules” (64).

## CONCLUSION

In our struggle to establish universal human literacy in the United States, we should . . . be inspired by the absolute, unmistakable resolve that we shall never undermine the quintessential definition of a literate human being: one soul, reaching out of the loneliness of the human condition to find--through love--another. Love too is a part of literacy. We should not be frightened by the word; nor should we be frightened by the hardnosed condemnation which will certainly assault our courage to persist in ethical and old-fashioned goals.

-Jonathan Kozol, *Illiterate America*

When African-American youth are at risk, all they get are public service spots with Patrick Ewing and David Robinson giving you the peace sign, and Shaquille O'Neal telling you to read a book. Sorry Shaq. When the National Rifle Association claims firm support in Congress and that same Congress tends to slash college loans, love and literacy stand little chance against guns and Gingrich.

-Derrick Z. Jackson, *The Boston Globe*

In the Introduction to this dissertation I said that rather than asking what could be learned *about* literacy narratives by applying theoretical and historical knowledge, I wanted to look at what could be learned *from* literacy narrative about our theories and histories. From the stories of Frederick Douglass, Susan Warner, Fanny Fern, Harriet Jacobs, Louisa May Alcott and Henry James I have begun to understand just how complex the concept of literacy is and how strongly it resists being defined.

What does this mean? It means that Derrick Jackson is right when he says that "love and literacy stand little chance against guns and Gingrich." Frederick Douglass certainly understood this more than a century ago when he finished reading from the *Columbian Orator* only to feel a deeper sense of his physical enslavement. His skills in reading and writing could not loosen the chains of his bondage.

But it means that Jonathan Kozol is right too. Love *is* a part of literacy,



as the story of Harriet Jacobs so fully illustrates. Kozol's definition of the literate being as "one soul, reaching out of the loneliness of the human condition to find--through love--another" is dramatized over and over again in the stories of women like Ruth Hall who use their literacy to engage in both private and public acts of mothering and in the stories of men like Frederick Douglass who continued to write throughout his life, motivated by a desire to help his fellow African-Americans.

The various images of literacy that have reoccurred in this dissertation--the chrysalis, the mirror, the window, the kaleidoscope, maternity and liminality, being inside the circle, writing in the spaces left--all share in common the embodiment of multiplicity and marginality. Literacy alone, the ability to read and write, does not provide an individual access to multiple subject positions. But metaliteracy does mean having the ability to occupy various subject positions at once, to shift among the various authoritative discourses at will in an almost Houdini-like process to elude the enslaving capacity of language. Reading and writing are essential parts of this skill, but one must also be able to step outside the circle into 'the spaces left' in order to fully understand the way that literacy and ideology are inextricably linked. Frederick Douglass eloquently characterizes this experience of metaliteracy when he invites his readers to share his own subject position, standing both inside and outside the circle of slavery in order to understand its human dimensions:

If anyone wishes to be impressed with the soul-killing effects of slavery, let him go to Colonel Lloyd's plantation, and, on allowance-day, place himself in the deep pine woods, and there let him, in silence, analyze the sounds that shall pass through the chambers of his soul, --and if he is not impressed, it will be because there is no flesh in his obdurate heart. (262)

In order to become metaliterate, one must engage in a kind of self-reflexivity even as she analyzes the experience of the other. That constant double-vision or “double-consciousness” as W.E.B. Du Bois would come to call it, that “gift of second sight,” is the often painful, often empowering experience of literacy.

The implications of this study are as various as its readers. For scholars of American Literature, we are left on the threshold of modernism with the understanding that many writers of the nineteenth century had already been practicing literate techniques identified as the hallmark of the modern age: the fracturing of perspectives; the stepping outside of the self; the occupying of various subject positions simultaneously; the questioning of cultural ideologies. This insight may help us to see greater continuities between writers that we have tended to separate from one other and to provide a reason for the border crossing to continue.

For those involved in the teaching of writing, these lessons in literateness have far reaching implications. For if we understand literacy as the ability to master various levels of authoritative discourses simultaneously (with academic discourse being only *one* among many) then our job in the writing classroom is much more complicated than teaching students to read and write public academic discourse. It also involves being sensitivity to the private and personal aspects of literacy and the powerful relationship between ideology and language. It means that we need to train students to be metaliterate, to be self-reflexive about their own literate acts as they learn to analyze various discourses and to encourage them to occupy various subject positions, to step into the spaces left and also to step back outside again.

Understanding literacy through personal stories also has implications for the way we continue to theorize about the writing process. For example, social constructionists argue that a writer does not “write,” but is herself written” by the language she uses. According to David Bartholomae’s account of “what happens when a personal history becomes a public account, [writers are] placed in a history that is not of the writer’s own invention; they are chronicles of loss, violence and compromise” (142). The chronicles of literacy in this study certainly do acknowledge this very real possibility, but they also argue persuasively that many individuals refused to be “written” by the languages of patriarchy and of slavery. In marginal spaces outside of our written histories, behind walls, under covers of darkness and secrecy, these individuals used literacy to defy oppression, to revise our theories and, I would argue, to rewrite history.

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